The New Criterion

February 2003

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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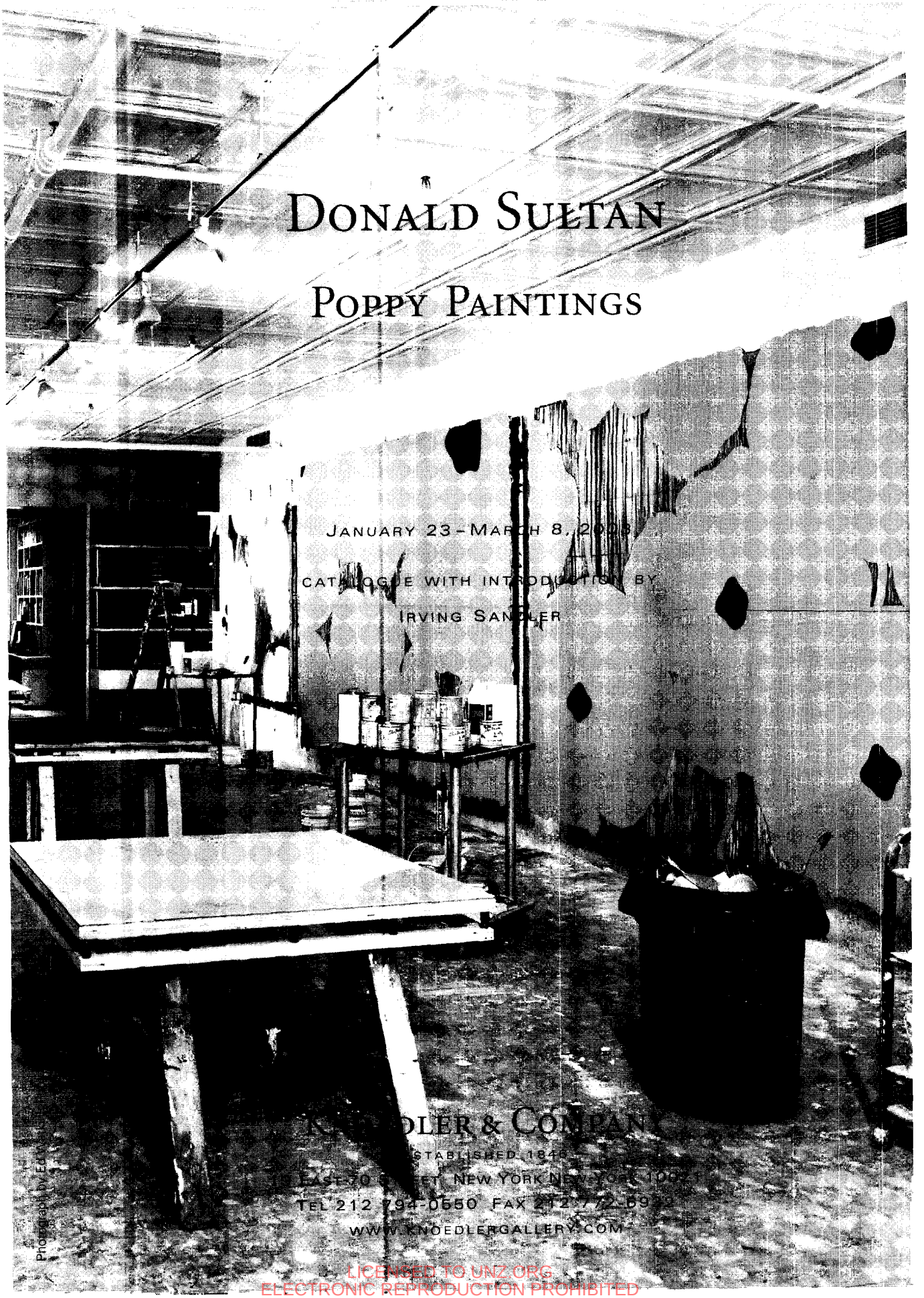

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The New Criterion *February 2003*

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Partisan Review

Winter 2003

"I put much hope in the European Union. I think that if the post-communist states had been admitted to membership a couple of years ago, the present and future Europe would be safer. . . . This waiting and expecting is humiliating the people and making them more frustrated."

—Eda Kriseova

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Notes & Comments: February 2003

The diversity con game

. . . the false theory of progress, which maintains that we alter the test instead of trying to pass the test.
—G. K. Chesterton

Last month, the Bush administration announced that it was filing legal briefs to challenge the University of Michigan's policy of using race as a factor in deciding who gets admitted to its undergraduate program and its law school. President Bush described Michigan's policy as a disguised quota system which violated the Constitutional right to equal protection.

Predictably, the administration's initiative sparked an orgy of hand-wringing in the liberal establishment. "The Bush administration sacrificed truth for political gain" and sought to "appease its right-wing supporters," thundered an editorial in *The New York Times*. "The administration should start leveling with the American people about race, and it should stop trying to turn back the clock."

It seemed to us the Bush Administration was being admirably straightforward. In its admissions policy, the University of Michigan employed the Orwellian principle that all applicants are equal, but some are more equal than others; it did this to be sure of admitting a predetermined proportion of black students. It looks like a quota system; it acts like a quota system; it is, in fact, a quota system.

But according to the editors of the *Times*, Bush used the term "quota" to scare people and achieve its nefarious ends. "The administration has fixed on the word 'quota' because it has long been political kryptonite. Pollsters know that many Americans who say they favor 'affirmative action' flip sides when asked about 'racial quotas.'"

Let's suppose that "many Americans" do respond to these phrases the way that the *Times* suggests they do. What does that tell us? We think it is a testament to the mendacious cleverness of the phrase "affirmative action." Pollsters discovered people didn't like that practice when it went under the name of quotas, so the politically correct establishment came up with a more pleasing euphemism. What, after all, does "affirmative action" really mean? It means "discrimination on the basis of race, sex, or some other agreed-upon attribute." What do you suppose the pollsters would discover if, instead of asking whether people favored "affirmative action," they asked "Do you favor discrimination on the basis of race?" That is the issue here, and, adopting the high dudgeon of our Paper of Record,

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we believe that the *Times* should stop sacrificing truth to political expediency and attempting to appease its left-wing supporters and "start leveling with the American people about race." The *Times* wants a certain percentage of its favorite minorities (or, in the case of women, its favorite majorities) installed . . . well, everywhere. If that doesn't happen naturally, through the meritocratic process of competition, the *Times* wants it imposed by fiat.

And as for "turning back the clock," we believe that the racialist assumptions behind "affirmative action" belong to the ash-heap of discredited efforts at social engineering. For the last decade or so, the racialist juggernaut of affirmative action has proceeded under the aegis of "diversity."

We offer two observations about this contemporary mantra. In the first place—although it seems decidedly heterodox to admit this—it is by no means clear that "diversity" is always and everywhere a good to which we should aspire. If diversity is in some situations a desideratum, in other situations unanimity or oneness is worth pursuing. In *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, his devastating answer to John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, James Fitzjames Stephen noted that by confounding the proposition that "variety is good with the proposition that goodness is various," Mill's teaching tended to encourage a shallow worship of mere variety, diversity for its own sake with no regard for value of the specific "diversities" being celebrated. That same shallowness is fostered by the cult of "affirmative action."

Secondly, if diversity is sometimes and in some circumstances a quality worth cultivating, it should be responsible *intellectual* diversity, real diversity of opinion and outlook, not the spurious diversity of skin color. The last time we looked, many of the court houses in the United States featured statues of Justice, blindfolded and holding a pair of scales. The idea—need we say it?—was that true justice is impartial: it is blind to the accidents of individual status, social or ethnic origin, sex, and wealth. True justice begins not by awarding extra points to someone because he is black, or rich, or socially prominent. It judges the case according to its merits—how novel that sounds to our ears!—by attempting to apply the law equally to all who come before it. By making a fetish of spurious diversity, the partisans of affirmative action help perpetuate the double standard they pretend to oppose. Isn't it time that liberals woke up to this fact?

Meanwhile, in Britain . . .

As we have had occasion to observe in the past, one of the unacknowledged and paradoxical side effects of the campaign for diversity is an increasingly severe effort to enforce strict conformity on any contentious issue. We say that this is paradoxical, but in fact it follows clearly from the emotional wellspring of the campaign for diversity, "affirmative action," etc.—namely the conviction that one is fighting for the imposition of virtue while one's opponents are benighted troglodytes ensnared by brutal self-interest. This has been a familiar scenario from time immemorial, and especially since the French Revolution when, inspired by the hothouse theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, insurrectionists like Robespierre, St. Just, and "Gracchus" Babeuf huddled under the banner of virtue while pursuing their murderous course.

The arrogance of virtue is not always murderous, but it is always coercive and repellent. American universities have furnished many splendid examples of the genre, but Americans have no monopoly on this sort of politically correct depredation. Consider the recent news, reported last month by *The Jerusalem Post*, that the British Musicians Union, representing thirty thousand members, has proposed banning Israeli musicians from appearing in Britain and British musicians from appearing in Israel until Israel withdraws from the

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West Bank and the Gaza Strip. (Let's see, why is Israel in those locations? Could it have anything to do with the fact that Israel has, from the day after it declared independence in 1948, been repeatedly attacked by Arab League nations, many of which deny its right to exist?)

The Simon Wiesenthal Center in Paris declared that the proposed ban "would violate the anti-discrimination provisions of the European Union." No doubt that is true. But one need not appeal to Big Brother in Brussels to oppose this ludicrous plan. Does it have a chance of passing? It is hard to say. Until the end of the 1950s, as *The Jerusalem Post* reports, the union banned American musicians from performing in Britain, ostensibly because Americans would be taking work from British musicians. (The ban was rescinded only when the American Federation of Musicians countered by prohibiting British artists from performing in the U.S.) Fired this time by misplaced righteousness, who knows what the British Musicians Union will do. One cheering sign is that *The Guardian*, a notoriously left-wing, anti-Israeli (and anti-American) paper, described the union as "a left-wing, doctrinaire organization as secretive and tight-lipped as the KGB." If even *The Guardian* finds the British Musicians Union beyond the pale, there are grounds for hope.

. . . *and in France*

As a showdown with Iraq approaches, the French and the Germans have outdone themselves in displays of anti-American and anti-war rhetoric. But even this is not without its comic moments. A friend reported that on CNN recently Jacques Chirac, the French president, said: "All war means failure"—to which she added immediately, "*Well*, for the French, that's true."

Roe v. Wade *at 30*

Last month was the thirtieth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, surely one of the most divisive Supreme Court decisions of our time. We do not propose to enter into the debate over abortion, but we would like to share with our readers a few sentences from "The Mother of All Rights," Meghan Cox Gurdon's reflection on *Roe v. Wade* in the January 21 issue of *The Wall Street Journal*. Ms. Gurdon begins by recalling the scene in "Schindler's List" where the actual survivors that Oskar Schindler saved, along with their children and grandchildren, line up to place stones on Schindler's grave. "What makes the scene so powerful," Ms. Gurdon writes, "is not just the surprising number of progeny already produced by the Holocaust escapees, but the staggering number of men, women and children who aren't there, who never had a chance of life because the Nazis gassed those who would have been their parents and grandparents." She continues:

> When Roe comes up, it has Schindler-like reverberations in my own family. The fact is, my husband and I, our four children, his three siblings, and their combined eight children all owe our lives to the fact that the famous Supreme Court decision did not come until 1973 (and its British equivalent until 1967). For all 17 of us are descended from two unwanted pregnancies—two pregnancies that produced two hasty marriages, some happiness, rather more sadness, and, eventually, two divorces. And I have to say, boy am I glad that those pregnancies—dismaying and unexpected as they were, entailing the compromises that they did for those involved—weren't tidied up in a clinic so that the young mothers in question could "get on with their lives." You, gentle reader, would have been deprived of nothing more than my editorial voice. I, and 16 kinsfolk, would have been robbed of everything.

Which does, we hope, give one pause.

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Why I became a conservative

by Roger Scruton

I was brought up at a time when half the English people voted Conservative at national elections and almost all English intellectuals regarded the term "conservative" as a term of abuse. To be a conservative, I was told, was to be on the side of age against youth, the past against the future, authority against innovation, the "structures" against spontaneity and life. It was enough to understand this, to recognize that one had no choice, as a free-thinking intellectual, save to reject conservatism. The choice remaining was between reform and revolution. Do we improve society bit by bit, or do we rub it out and start again? On the whole my contemporaries favored the second option, and it was when witnessing what this meant, in May 1968 in Paris, that I discovered my vocation.

In the narrow street below my window the students were shouting and smashing. The plate-glass windows of the shops appeared to step back, shudder for a second, and then give up the ghost, as the reflections suddenly left them and they slid in jagged fragments to the ground. Cars rose into the air and landed on their sides, their juices flowing from unseen wounds. The air was filled with triumphant shouts, as one by one lamp-posts and bollards were uprooted and piled on the tarmac, to form a barricade against the next van-load of policemen.

The van—known then as a *panier de salade* on account of the wire mesh that covered its windows—came cautiously round the corner from the Rue Descartes, jerked to a halt, and disgorged a score of frightened policemen. They were greeted by flying cobble-stones and several of them fell. One rolled over on the ground clutching his face, from which the blood streamed through tightly clenched fingers. There was an exultant shout, the injured policeman was helped into the van, and the students ran off down a side-street, sneering at the *cochons* and throwing Parthian cobbles as they went.

That evening a friend came round: she had been all day on the barricades with a troupe of theater people, under the captainship of Armand Gatti. She was very excited by the events, which Gatti, a follower of Antonin Artaud, had taught her to regard as the high point of situationist theater—the artistic transfiguration of an absurdity which is the day-to-day meaning of bourgeois life. Great victories had been scored: policemen injured, cars set alight, slogans chanted, graffiti daubed. The bourgeoisie were on the run and soon the Old Fascist and his régime would be begging for mercy.

The Old Fascist was de Gaulle, whose *Mémoires de guerre* I had been reading that day. The *Mémoires* begin with a striking sentence—*"Toute ma vie, je me suis fait une certaine idée de la France"*—a sentence so alike in its rhythm and so contrary in its direction to that equally striking sentence which begins *A la recherche du temps perdu*: *"Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure."* How

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amazing it had been, to discover a politician who begins his self-vindication by *suggesting* something—and something so deeply hidden behind the bold mask of his words! I had been equally struck by the description of the state funeral for Valéry—de Gaulle's first public gesture on liberating Paris—since it too suggested priorities unimaginable in an English politician. The image of the cortège, as it took its way to the cathedral of Notre Dame, the proud general first among the mourners, and here and there a German sniper still looking down from the rooftops, had made a vivid impression on me. I irresistibly compared the two bird's-eye views of Paris, that of the sniper, and my own on to the riots in the *quartier latin*. They were related as yes and no, the affirmation and denial of a national idea. According to the Gaullist vision, a nation is defined not by institutions or borders but by language, religion, and high culture; in times of turmoil and conquest it is those spiritual things that must be protected and reaffirmed. The funeral for Valéry followed naturally from this way of seeing things. And I associated the France of de Gaulle with Valéry's *Cimetière marin*—that haunting invocation of the dead which conveyed to me, much more profoundly than any politician's words or gestures, the true meaning of a national idea.

Of course I was naïve—as naïve as my friend. But the ensuing argument is one to which I have often returned in my thoughts. What, I asked, do you propose to put in the place of this "bourgeoisie" whom you so despise, and to whom you owe the freedom and prosperity that enable you to play on your toy barricades? What vision of France and its culture compels you? And are you prepared to die for your beliefs, or merely to put others at risk in order to display them? I was obnoxiously pompous: but for the first time in my life I had felt a surge of political anger, finding myself on the other side of the barricades from all the people I knew.

She replied with a book: Foucault's *Les mots et les choses*, the bible of the *soixante-huitards*, the text which seemed to justify every form of transgression, by showing that obedience is merely defeat. It is an artful book, composed with a satanic mendacity, selectively appropriating facts in order to show that culture and knowledge are nothing but the "discourses" of power. The book is not a work of philosophy but an exercise in rhetoric. Its goal is subversion, not truth, and it is careful to argue—by the old nominalist sleight of hand that was surely invented by the Father of Lies—that "truth" requires inverted commas, that it changes from epoch to epoch, and is tied to the form of consciousness, the "*episteme*," imposed by the class which profits from its propagation. The revolutionary spirit, which searches the world for things to hate, has found in Foucault a new literary formula. Look everywhere for power, he tells his readers, and you will find it. Where there is power there is oppression. And where there is oppression there is the right to destroy. In the street below my window was the translation of that message into deeds.

My friend is now a good bourgeoise like the rest of them. Armand Gatti is forgotten; and the works of Antonin Artaud have a quaint and *dépassé* air. The French intellectuals have turned their backs on '68, and the late Louis Pauwels, the greatest of their post-war novelists, has, in *Les Orphelins*, written the damning obituary of their adolescent rage. And Foucault? He is dead from AIDS, the result of sprees in the bathhouses of San Francisco, visited during well-funded tours as an intellectual celebrity. But his books are on university reading lists all over Europe and America. His vision of European culture as the institutionalized form of oppressive power is taught everywhere as gospel, to students who have neither the culture nor the religion to resist it. Only in France is he widely regarded as a fraud.

By 1971, when I moved from Cambridge to a permanent lectureship at Birkbeck College, London, I had become a conservative.

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So far as I could discover there was only one other conservative at Birkbeck, and that was Nunzia—Maria Annunziata—the Neapolitan lady who served meals in the Senior Common Room and who cocked a snook at the lecturers by plastering her counter with kitschy photos of the Pope.

One of those lecturers, towards whom Nunzia conceived a particular antipathy, was Eric Hobsbawm, the lionized historian of the Industrial Revolution, whose Marxist vision of our country is now the orthodoxy taught in British schools. Hobsbawm came as a refugee to Britain, bringing with him the Marxist commitment and Communist Party membership that he retained until he could retain it no longer—the Party, to his chagrin, having dissolved itself in embarrassment at the lies that could no longer be repeated. No doubt in recognition of this heroic career, Hobsbawm was rewarded, at Mr. Blair's behest, with the second highest award that the Queen can bestow—that of "Companion of Honour." This little story is of enormous significance to a British conservative. For it is a symptom and a symbol of what has happened to our intellectual life since the Sixties. We should ponder the extraordinary fact that Oxford University, which granted an honorary degree to Bill Clinton on the grounds that he had once hung around its precincts, refused the same honor to Margaret Thatcher, its most distinguished post-war graduate and Britain's first woman Prime Minister. We should ponder some of the other recipients of honorary degrees from British academic institutions—Robert Mugabe, for example, or the late Mrs. Ceausescu—or count (on the fingers of one hand) the number of conservatives who are elected to the British Academy.

Suffice it to say that I found myself, on arrival in Birkbeck College, at the heart of the left establishment which governed British scholarship. Birkbeck College had grown from the Mechanics Institution founded by George Birkbeck in 1823 and was devoted to the education of people in full-time employment. It was connected to the socialist idealists of the Workers' Education Association, and had links of a tenacious but undiscoverable kind to the Labour Party. My failure to conceal my conservative beliefs was both noticed and disapproved of, and I began to think that I should look for another career.

Because of Birkbeck's mission as a center of adult education, lectures began at 6 P.M. and the days were nominally free. I used my mornings to study for the Bar: my intention was to embark on a career which gave no advantage to utopians and malcontents. In fact I never practiced at the Bar and received from my studies only an intellectual benefit—though a benefit for which I have always been profoundly grateful. Law is constrained at every point by reality, and utopian visions have no place in it. Moreover the common law of England is proof that there is a real distinction between legitimate and illegitimate power, that power can exist without oppression, and that authority is a living force in human conduct. English law, I discovered, is the answer to Foucault.

Inspired by my new studies I began to search for a conservative philosophy. In America this search could be conducted in a university. American departments of political science encourage their students to read Montesquieu, Burke, Tocqueville, and the Founding Fathers. Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and others have grafted the metaphysical conservatism of Central Europe on to American roots, forming effective and durable schools of political thought. American intellectual life benefits from American patriotism, which has made it possible to defend American customs and institutions without fear of being laughed to scorn. It has benefited too from the Cold War, which sharpened native wits against the Marxist enemy, in a way that they were never sharpened in Europe: the conversion of important parts of the social democratic Jewish intelligentsia of New York to the cause of neo-conservatism is a case in point. In 1970s Britain, conservative philosophy was the

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preoccupation of a few half-mad recluses. Searching the library of my college, I found Marx, Lenin, and Mao, but no Strauss, Voegelin, Hayek, or Friedman. I found every variety of socialist monthly, weekly, or quarterly, but not a single journal that confessed to being conservative.

The view has for a long time prevailed in England that conservatism is simply no longer available—even if it ever has been really available to an intelligent person—as a social and political creed. Maybe, if you are an aristocrat or a child of wealthy and settled parents, you might *inherit* conservative beliefs, in the way that you might inherit a speech impediment or a Habsburg jaw. But you couldn't possibly *acquire* them—certainly not by any process of rational enquiry or serious thought. And yet there I was, in the early 1970s, fresh from the shock of 1968, and from the countervailing shock of legal studies, with a fully articulate set of conservative beliefs. Where could I look for the people who shared them, for the thinkers who had spelled them out at proper length, for the social, economic, and political theory that would give them force and authority sufficient to argue them in the forum of academic opinion?

To my rescue came Burke. Although not widely read at the time in our universities, he had not been dismissed as stupid, reactionary, or absurd. He was simply irrelevant, of interest largely because he got everything wrong about the French Revolution and therefore could be studied as illustrating an episode in intellectual pathology. Students were still permitted to read him, usually in conjunction with the immeasurably less interesting Tom Paine, and from time to time you heard tell of a "Burkean" philosophy, which was one strand within nineteenth-century British conservatism.

Burke was of additional interest to me on account of the intellectual path that he had trod. His first work, like mine, was in aesthetics. And although I didn't find much of philosophical significance in his *Essay on the Sublime and the Beautiful*, I could see that, in the right cultural climate, it would convey a powerful sense of the meaning of aesthetic judgment and of its indispensable place in our lives. I suppose that, in so far as I had received any intimations of my future career as an intellectual pariah, it was through my early reactions to modern architecture, and to the desecration of my childhood landscape by the faceless boxes of suburbia. I learned as a teenager that aesthetic judgment matters, that it is not merely a subjective opinion, unargued because unarguable, and of no significance to anyone besides oneself. I saw—though I did not have the philosophy to justify this—that aesthetic judgment lays a claim upon the world, that it issues from a deep social imperative, and that it matters to us in just the way that other people matter to us, when we strive to live with them in a community. And, so it seemed to me, the aesthetics of modernism, with its denial of the past, its vandalization of the landscape and townscape, and its attempt to purge the world of history, was also a denial of community, home, and settlement. Modernism in architecture was an attempt to remake the world as though it contained nothing save atomic individuals, disinfected of the past, and living like ants within their metallic and functional shells.

Like Burke, therefore, I made the passage from aesthetics to conservative politics with no sense of intellectual incongruity, believing that, in each case, I was in search of a lost experience of home. And I suppose that, underlying that sense of loss is the permanent belief that what has been lost can also be recaptured—not necessarily as it was when it first slipped from our grasp, but as it will be when consciously regained and remodelled, to reward us for all the toil of separation through which we are condemned by our original transgression. That belief is the romantic core of conservatism, as you find it—very differently expressed—in Burke and Hegel, and also in T. S. Eliot, whose poetry was the greatest influence on me during my teenage years.

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When I first read Burke's account of the French Revolution I was inclined to accept, since I knew no other, the liberal humanist view of the Revolution as a triumph of freedom over oppression, a liberation of a people from the yoke of absolute power. Although there were excesses—and no honest historian had ever denied this—the official humanist view was that they should be seen in retrospect as the birth-pangs of a new order, which would offer a model of popular sovereignty to the world. I therefore assumed that Burke's early doubts—expressed, remember, when the Revolution was in its very first infancy, and the King had not yet been executed nor the Terror begun—were simply alarmist reactions to an ill-understood event. What interested me in the *Reflections* was the positive political philosophy, distinguished from all the leftist literature that was currently à la mode, by its absolute concretion, and its close reading of the human psyche in its ordinary and unexalted forms. Burke was not writing about socialism, but about revolution. Nevertheless he persuaded me that the utopian promises of socialism go hand in hand with a wholly abstract vision of the human mind—a geometrical version of our mental processes which has only the vaguest relation to the thoughts and feelings by which real human beings live. He persuaded me that societies are not and cannot be organized according to a plan or a goal, that there is no direction to history, and no such thing as moral or spiritual progress.

Most of all he emphasized that the new forms of politics, which hope to organize society around the rational pursuit of liberty, equality, fraternity, or their modernist equivalents, are actually forms of militant irrationality. There is no way in which people can collectively pursue liberty, equality, and fraternity, not only because those things are lamentably underdescribed and merely abstractly defined, but also because collective reason doesn't work that way. People reason collectively towards a common goal only in times of emergency—when there is a threat to be vanquished, or a conquest to be achieved. Even then, they need organization, hierarchy, and a structure of command if they are to pursue their goal effectively. Nevertheless, a form of collective rationality does emerge in these cases, and its popular name is war.

Moreover—and here is the corollary that came home to me with a shock of recognition—any attempt to organize society according to this kind of rationality would involve exactly the same conditions: the declaration of war against some real or imagined enemy. Hence the strident and militant language of the socialist literature—the hate-filled, purpose-filled, bourgeois-baiting prose, one example of which had been offered to me in 1968, as the final vindication of the violence beneath my attic window, but other examples of which, starting with the *Communist Manifesto*, were the basic diet of political studies in my university. The literature of left-wing political science is a literature of conflict, in which the main variables are those identified by Lenin: "Kto? Kogo?"—"Who? Whom?" The opening sentence of de Gaulle's memoirs is framed in the language of love, about an object of love—and I had spontaneously resonated to this in the years of the student "struggle." De Gaulle's allusion to Proust is to a masterly evocation of maternal love, and to a dim premonition of its loss.

Three other arguments of Burke's made a comparable impression. The first was the defense of authority and obedience. Far from being the evil and obnoxious thing that my contemporaries held it to be, authority was, for Burke, the root of political order. Society, he argued, is not held together by the abstract rights of the citizen, as the French Revolutionaries supposed. It is held together by authority—by which is meant the right to obedience, rather than the mere power to compel it. And obedience, in its turn, is the prime virtue of political beings, the disposition which makes it possible to govern them, and without which societies crumble into "the

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dust and powder of individuality." Those thoughts seemed as obvious to me as they were shocking to my contemporaries. In effect Burke was upholding the old view of man in society, as subject of a sovereign, against the new view of him, as citizen of a state. And what struck me vividly was that, in defending this old view, Burke demonstrated that it was a far more effective guarantee of the liberties of the individual than the new idea, which was founded in the promise of those very liberties, only abstractly, universally, and therefore unreally defined. Real freedom, concrete freedom, the freedom that can actually be defined, claimed, and granted, was not the opposite of obedience but its other side. The abstract, unreal freedom of the liberal intellect was really nothing more than childish disobedience, amplified into anarchy. Those ideas exhilarated me, since they made sense of what I had seen in 1968. But when I expressed them, in a book published in 1979 as *The Meaning of Conservatism*, I blighted what remained of my academic career.

The second argument of Burke's that impressed me was the subtle defense of tradition, prejudice, and custom, against the enlightened plans of the reformers. This defense engaged, once again, with my study of aesthetics. Already as a schoolboy I had encountered the elaborate defense of artistic and literary tradition given by Eliot and F. R. Leavis. I had been struck by Eliot's essay entitled "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which tradition is represented as a constantly evolving, yet continuous thing, which is remade with every addition to it, and which adapts the past to the present and the present to the past. This conception, which seemed to make sense of Eliot's kind of modernism (a modernism that is the polar opposite of that which has prevailed in architecture), also rescued the study of the past, and made my own love of the classics in art, literature, and music into a valid part of my psyche as a modern human being.

Burke's defense of tradition seemed to translate this very concept into the world of politics, and to make respect for custom, establishment, and settled communal ways, into a political virtue, rather than a sign, as my contemporaries mostly believed, of complacency. And Burke's provocative defense, in this connection, of "prejudice" —by which he meant the set of beliefs and ideas that arise instinctively in social beings, and which reflect the root experiences of social life—was a revelation of something that until then I had entirely overlooked. Burke brought home to me that our most necessary beliefs may be both unjustified and unjustifiable from our own perspective, and that the attempt to justify them will lead merely to their loss. Replacing them with the abstract rational systems of the philosophers, we may think ourselves more rational and better equipped for life in the modern world. But in fact we are less well equipped, and our new beliefs are far less justified, for the very reason that they are justified by ourselves. The real justification for a prejudice is the one which justifies it *as* a prejudice, rather than as a rational conclusion of an argument. In other words it is a justification that cannot be conducted from our own perspective, but only from outside, as it were, as an anthropologist might justify the customs and rituals of an alien tribe.

An example will illustrate the point: the prejudices surrounding sexual relations. These vary from society to society; but until recently they have had a common feature, which is that people distinguish seemly from unseemly conduct, abhor explicit sexual display, and require modesty in women and chivalry in men in the negotiations that precede sexual union. There are very good anthropological reasons for this, in terms of the long-term stability of sexual relations, and the commitment that is necessary if children are to be inducted into society. But these are not the reasons that motivate the traditional conduct of men and women. This conduct is guided by deep and immovable prejudice, in which outrage, shame, and honor are the ultimate grounds.

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The sexual liberator has no difficulty in showing that those motives are irrational, in the sense of being founded on no reasoned justification available to the person whose motives they are. And he may propose sexual liberation as a rational alternative, a code of conduct that is rational from the first-person viewpoint, since it derives a complete code of practice from a transparently reasonable aim, which is sexual pleasure.

This substitution of reason for prejudice has indeed occurred. And the result is exactly as Burke would have anticipated. Not merely a breakdown in trust between the sexes, but a faltering in the reproductive process—a failing and enfeebled commitment of parents, not merely to each other, but also to their offspring. At the same time, individual feelings, which were shored up and fulfilled by the traditional prejudices, are left exposed and unprotected by the skeletal structures of rationality. Hence the extraordinary situation in America, where lawsuits have replaced common courtesy, where post-coital accusations of "date-rape" take the place of pre-coital modesty, and where advances made by the unattractive are routinely penalized as "sexual harrassment." This is an example of what happens, when prejudice is wiped away in the name of reason, without regard for the real social function that prejudice alone can fulfill. And indeed, it was partly by reflecting on the disaster of sexual liberation, and the joyless world that it has produced around us, that I came to see the truth of Burke's otherwise somewhat paradoxical defense of prejudice.

The final argument that impressed me was Burke's response to the theory of the social contract. Although society can be seen as a contract, he argued, we must recognize that most parties to the contract are either dead or not yet born. The effect of the contemporary Rousseauist ideas of social contract was to place the present members of society in a position of dictatorial dominance over those who went before and those who came after them. Hence these ideas led directly to the massive squandering of inherited resources at the Revolution, and to the cultural and ecological vandalism that Burke was perhaps the first to recognize as the principal danger of modern politics. In Burke's eyes the self-righteous contempt for ancestors which characterized the Revolutionaries was also a disinheriting of the unborn. Rightly understood, he argued, society is a partnership among the dead, the living, and the unborn, and without what he called the "hereditary principle," according to which rights could be inherited as well as acquired, both the dead and the unborn would be disenfranchized. Indeed, respect for the dead was, in Burke's view, the only real safeguard that the unborn could obtain, in a world that gave all its privileges to the living. His preferred vision of society was not as a contract, in fact, but as a trust, with the living members as trustees of an inheritance that they must strive to enhance and pass on.

I was more exhilarated by those ideas than by anything else in Burke, since they seemed to explain with the utmost clarity the dim intuitions that I had had in 1968, as I watched the riots from my window and thought of Valéry's *Cimetière marin*. In those deft, cool thoughts, Burke summarized all my instinctive doubts about the cry for liberation, all my hesitations about progress and about the unscrupulous belief in the future that has dominated and perverted modern politics. In effect, Burke was joining in the old Platonic cry, for a form of politics that would also be a form of care—"care of the soul," as Plato put it, which would also be a care for absent generations. The graffiti paradoxes of the *soixante-huitards* were the very opposite of this: a kind of adolescent insouciance, a throwing away of all customs, institutions, and achievements, for the sake of a momentary exultation which could have no lasting sense save anarchy.

It was not until much later, after my first visit to communist Europe, that I came to understand and sympathize with the nega-

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tive energy in Burke. I had grasped the positive thesis—the defense of prejudice, tradition, and heredity, and of a politics of trusteeship in which the past and the future had equal weight to the present—but I had not grasped the deep negative thesis, the glimpse into Hell, contained in his vision of the Revolution. As I said, I shared the liberal humanist view of the French Revolution, and knew nothing of the facts that decisively refuted that view and which vindicated the argument of Burke's astonishingly prescient essay. My encounter with Communism entirely rectified this.

Perhaps the most fascinating and terrifying aspect of Communism was its ability to banish truth from human affairs, and to force whole populations to "live within the lie," as President Havel put it. George Orwell wrote a prophetic and penetrating novel about this; but few Western readers of that novel knew the extent to which its prophecies had come true in Central Europe. To me it was the greatest revelation, when first I travelled to Czechoslovakia in 1979, to come face to face with a situation in which people could, at any moment, be removed from the book of history, in which truth could not be uttered, and in which the Party could decide from day to day not only what would happen tomorrow, but also what had happened today, what had happened yesterday, and what had happened before its leaders had been born. This, I realized, was the situation that Burke was describing, to a largely incredulous readership, in 1790. And two hundred years later the situation still existed, and the incredulity along with it.

Until 1979 my knowledge of Communism had been entirely theoretical. I did not like what I had read, of course, and was hostile in any case to the socialist ideas of equality and state control, of which I had already seen enough in France and Britain. But I knew nothing of what it is like to live under Communism—nothing of the day-to-day humiliation of being a non-person, to whom all avenues of self-expression are closed. As for Czechoslovakia, as it then was, I knew only what I had gleaned from its music—the music of Smetana, Dvořák, and Janáček in particular, to all three of whom I owe the greatest of debts for the happiness they have brought me. Of course, I had read Kafka and Hašek—but they belonged to another world, the world of a dying empire, and it was only subsequently that I was able to see that they too were prophets, and that they were describing not the present but the future of their city.

I had been asked to give a talk to a private seminar in Prague. This seminar was organized by Julius Tomin, a Prague philosopher, who had taken advantage of the Helsinki Accords of 1975, which supposedly obliged the Czechoslovak government to uphold freedom of information and the basic rights defined by the U.N. Charter. The Helsinki Accords were a farce, used by the Communists to identify potential troublemakers, while presenting a face of civilized government to gullible intellectuals in the West. Nevertheless, I was told that Dr. Tomin's seminar met on a regular basis, that I would be welcome to attend it, and that they were indeed expecting me.

I arrived at the house, after walking through those silent and deserted streets, in which the few who stood seemed occupied by some dark official business, and in which Party slogans and symbols disfigured every building. The staircase of the apartment building was also deserted. Everywhere the same expectant silence hung in the air, as when an air-raid has been announced, and the town hides from its imminent destruction. Outside the apartment, however, I encountered two policemen, who seized me as I rang the bell and demanded my papers. Dr. Tomin came out, and an altercation ensued, during which I was thrown down the stairs. But the argument continued and I was able to push my way past the guard and enter the apartment. I found a room full of people, and the same expectant silence. I realized that there really was going to be an air-raid, and that the air-raid was me.

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In that room was a battered remnant of Prague's intelligentsia—old professors in their shabby waistcoats; long-haired poets; fresh-faced students who had been denied admission to university for their parents' political "crimes"; priests and religious in plain clothes; novelists and theologians; a would-be rabbi; and even a psychoanalyst. And in all of them I saw the same marks of suffering, tempered by hope; and the same eager desire for the sign that someone cared enough to help them. They all belonged, I discovered, to the same profession: that of the stoker. Some stoked boilers in hospitals; others in apartment blocks; one stoked at a railway station, another in a school. Some stoked where there were no boilers to stoke, and these imaginary boilers came to be, for me, a fitting symbol of the communist economy.

This was my first encounter with "dissidents": the people who, to my astonishment, would be the first democratically elected leaders of post-war Czechoslovakia. And I felt towards these people an immediate affinity. Nothing was of such importance for them as the survival of their national culture. Deprived of material and professional advancement, their days were filled with a forced meditation on their country and its past, and on the great Question of Czech History which has preoccupied the Czechs since Palacký's day. They were forbidden to publish; the authorities had concealed their existence from the world and had resolved to remove their traces from the book of history. Hence the dissidents were acutely conscious of the value of memory. Their lives were an exercise in what Plato calls *anamnesis*: the bringing to consciousness of forgotten things. Something in me responded to this poignant ambition, and I was at once eager to join with them and make their situation known to the world.

Briefly, I spent the next ten years in daily meditation on Communism, on the myths of equality and fraternity that underlay its oppressive routines, just as they had underlain the routines of the French Revolution. And I came to see that Burke's account of the Revolution was not merely a piece of contemporary history. It was like Milton's account of Paradise Lost—an exploration of a region of the human psyche: a region that lies always ready to be visited, but from which return is by way of a miracle, to a world whose beauty is thereafter tainted by the memories of Hell. To put it very simply, I had been granted a vision of Satan and his work—the very same vision that had shaken Burke to the depths of his being. And I at last recognized the positive aspect of Burke's philosophy as a response to that vision, as a description of the best that human beings can hope for, and as the sole and sufficient vindication of our life on earth.

Henceforth I understood conservatism not as a political credo only, but as a lasting vision of human society, one whose truth would always be hard to perceive, harder still to communicate, and hardest of all to act upon. And especially hard is it now, when religious sentiments follow the whims of fashion, when the global economy throws our local loyalties into disarray, and when materialism and luxury deflect the spirit from the proper business of living. But I do not despair, since experience has taught me that men and women can flee from the truth only for so long, that they will always, in the end, be reminded of the permanent values, and that the dreams of liberty, equality, and fraternity will excite them only in the short-term.

As to the task of transcribing, into the practice and process of modern politics, the philosophy that Burke made plain to the world, this is perhaps the greatest task that we now confront. I do not despair of it; but the task cannot be described or embraced by a slogan. It requires not a collective change of mind but a collective change of heart.

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What happened to Aldous Huxley?

by John Derbyshire

Metaphysics is out of fashion. There is, as department-store sales assistants say, not much call for it nowadays. The word "metaphysics" does not even occur in the index of the current bestseller about human nature, Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate*, nor does Professor Pinker's text betray any interest in the topic. Most of us, if challenged to disclose our metaphysical beliefs, would probably offer a part-baked dualism. Yes, certainly there is an outer reality, "the universe," made up of material objects whose behavior, thanks to four hundred years of diligent scientific inquiry, we can understand, or at any rate predict, in fine detail. And yes, there is an inner reality, "the self," comprised of mental objects about which science has much less to say, and some irreducible core of which, we are inclined to think, exists independently of the material world. Those of us who are up to date with developments in neuroscience, or who have read Tom Wolfe's famous article on the subject ("Sorry, but your soul just died," in the December 1996 issue of *Forbes ASAP*) are uncomfortably aware of the relentlessness with which researchers have been shrinking the size of that core, but we live in faith that they will never succeed in eliminating it altogether. Professor Pinker, who is very up to date indeed in these matters, plainly does not share that faith, hence his utter neglect of matters metaphysical.

Living as we do in such an unmetaphysical age, we are in a poor frame of mind to approach the writer who said the following thing, and who took it as a premise for his work through most of a long literary career.

> It is impossible to live without a metaphysic. The choice that is given us is not between some kind of metaphysic and no metaphysic; it is always between a good metaphysic and a bad metaphysic.

Aldous Huxley published his first book, a collection of poems, in 1916, shortly after his twenty-second birthday. He died in November 1963, a few weeks after having brought out his twentieth book of essays. (He actually died on the day John F. Kennedy was shot.) At that point Huxley's published work also included three more poetry collections, eleven novels, five short story collections, two travel books, two biographies, a play, some collaborative work on movie scripts, and a mass of fugitive journalism. It was the essays, though, that were the essential Aldous Huxley for a large part of his readership. A star-struck young visitor at the Huxleys' California house in 1939 wrote that: "I had been bitterly disappointed with [Huxley's sixth novel *Eyeless in Gaza*] and unsympathetic to religious experiences, but of course it was Aldous of the Essays, . . . gentle, inquiring, fascinating, and fascinated too with every fact, every thought, hesitatingly brought out with the amazed inflection of his voice."

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Huxley's essays have now been gathered together in six volumes by Robert S. Baker of the University of Wisconsin at Madison and James Sexton of Camosun College in British Columbia. The first volume appeared two years ago; the last, covering the years 1956–63, has just come out.[1] Here, in a uniform edition, are not only the essays Huxley published in book form, with his two travel books included for good measure, but also scores of magazine and newspaper pieces previously accessible to the general reader only with difficulty. Title notwithstanding, the *Complete Essays* is not absolutely comprehensive, and does not claim to be. None of Huxley's earliest articles for the *Athenaeum* or the *London Mercury* are here, and a few later pieces I would have liked to see—the 1944 *Harper's* piece on Sheldonism (see below), for example—are missing.[2] This is, though, a good representative collection, gathering between hard covers the whole sweep of Huxley's thought, as it developed across forty-four years.

All of Huxley's biographers begin by pointing out that his bloodlines were distinguished, but somewhat oddly mixed. His paternal grandfather was Thomas Henry Huxley, the great Victorian biologist, best remembered for his victory against Archbishop Wilberforce in the 1860 debate about evolution. Known as "Darwin's bulldog," T. H. Huxley advocated scientism—that is, the belief that there is no area of human experience or understanding into which science will not eventually advance, or which the scientific method will be unable to explain. He seems to have coined the word "agnostic," and used it to describe his own position on the mysteries of mind, spirit, and creation. Aldous's mother was a granddaughter of the great evangelical headmaster Dr. Thomas Arnold, the "Doctor" in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, originator of the "muscular Christianity" style of boarding-school education for boys, and father of the poet Matthew Arnold (who was, therefore, Aldous Huxley's great-uncle). Dr. Arnold was an intensely religious man, who, when headmaster of Rugby, was reported to break down and weep openly in front of the whole school at the story of Christ's Passion.

To what degree these antecedents, or his consciousness of them, shaped Aldous's own thinking, is a matter of some interest, the more so since eugenics—a respectable field of discussion and inquiry until tainted by association with Nazi "race science"—is a key topic in Huxley's best-remembered novel, *Brave New World*, published in 1932. The following things, at least, can be said with certainty: Aldous Huxley was raised in a family that took intellectual inquiry very seriously indeed, he maintained a lifelong interest in science, and he treated the religious instinct with utmost respect.

The high summer of Victorian scientific optimism in which Aldous's grandfather had basked was long gone by the time Aldous reached intellectual maturity. So—thanks in part to Grandpa Huxley's efforts—was the social atmosphere in which serious intellectuals, at any rate in the Anglo-Saxon countries, could base programs for social reform on evangelical Christianity, as Dr. Arnold had. The second and third decades of the twentieth century were notoriously an age of failed gods and shattered conventions, to which many thoughtful people responded in obvious ways, retreating into nihilism, hedonism, and experimentalism. Literature became subjective, art became abstract, poetry abandoned its traditional forms. In the "low, dishonest decade" that then fol-

1 *Complete Essays: Volume VI, 1956–1963*, by Aldous Huxley, edited with commentary by Robert S. Baker and James Sexton; Ivan R. Dee, 416 pages, $35.

2 According to Huxley's biographer Sybille Bedford, "In 1919, in the course of the eight months-odd he was working for the *Athenaeum*, Aldous contributed 29 signed articles and 171 anonymous notices and reviews to the paper, did 8 articles for the *London Mercury* and some reviews." Bedford's biography, which first appeared in two volumes in 1973, has been reissued in a single volume by Ivan R. Dee, 832 pages, $24.95 (paper).

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lowed, much of this negativism curdled into power-worship and escapism of various kinds.

Aldous Huxley stood aside from these large general trends. Though no Victorian in habits or beliefs, he never entered wholeheartedly into the spirit of modernism. The evidence is all over the early volumes of these essays. *Ulysses*, he declares in 1925, is "one of the dullest books ever written, and one of the least significant." Jazz, he remarks two years later, is "drearily barbaric." Writing of Sir Christopher Wren in 1923, he quotes with approval Carlyle's remark that Chelsea Hospital, one of Wren's creations, was "obviously the work of a gentleman." Wren, Huxley goes on to say, was indeed a great gentleman, "one who valued dignity and restraint and who, respecting himself, respected also humanity."

In his thirties, in fact, Huxley comes across as something of a Young Fogey. "I have grown shameless. . . . I can watch unmoved the departure of the last social-cultural bus—the innumerable last buses which are starting at every instant in all the world's capitals. I make no effort to board them, and when the noise of each departure has died down, 'Thank Goodness!' is what I say to myself in the solitude." Those remarks preface a horrified review of the first non-silent movie to strike box-office gold, *The Jazz Singer*.

> A beneficent providence has dimmed my powers of sight, so that, at a distance of more than four or five yards, I am blissfully unaware of the full horror of the average human countenance. At the cinema, however, there is no escape. Magnified up to Brobdingnagian proportions, the human countenance smiles its six-foot smile, opens and closes its thirty-two inch eyes, registered [*sic*] soulfulness or grief, libido or whimsicality with every square centimeter of its several roods of pallid mooniness. . . . For the first time I felt grateful for the defect of vision which had preserved me from a daily acquaintance with such scenes.

Considering that he is thought of nowadays largely as a herald for some soon-to-arrive future of hedonism via genetic manipulation, Huxley could be remarkably old-fashioned.

That "defect of vision" for which Huxley offered ironic thanks was in fact one of the great determinants of his life, constraining his movements in the world and keeping him out of military service during World War I. It began in 1911, when, at the age of seventeen, he was afflicted with a disease of the eyes (eventually diagnosed as *keratitis punctata*, an inflammation of the corneas) that for several months rendered him actually and completely blind. Huxley reacted to this disaster with heroic fortitude. Sent home from Eton, he took up Braille and used it to pursue his studies. He even taught himself to play the piano, with one hand on the keyboard and one on the Braille music sheet. He wrote his first novel while blind (it was never published), and spoke of his affliction only to crack jokes about it. His cousin Gervas Huxley came into his room one bitter winter morning to be greeted with: "You know, Gerry, there's one great advantage in Braille, you can read in bed without getting your hands cold."

Huxley's later description of the state of his eyesight at the time he went up to Oxford in 1913 was as follows: "I was left . . . with one eye just capable of light perception, and the other with enough vision to permit of my detecting the two-hundred foot letter on the Snellen chart at ten feet." Under these circumstances, the recollections of his Oxford coevals are astonishing. Gervas, in a comment one feels obliged to read twice to make sure one has got it right, reported that: "He had read a great deal while he was blind—working on his own, he read a lot of things, like French, which we didn't know." Raymond Mortimer, who was a freshman with Huxley, described him as: "formidably sophisticated . . . dazzling. . . . The erudition: he had read everything." Huxley graduated with a first in English, having done all the reading for his degree with the aid of a powerful magnifying glass.

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To have passed through such a crisis, at just the age when one is reading with the most attention and absorption, emerging on the other side of that crisis to impress the brilliant young undergraduates of pre-World War I Oxford as a person who had "read everything," was a stunning intellectual achievement. I do not think there is any question that Aldous Huxley regarded the life of the intellect with utmost seriousness, and worked very hard at keeping his own mind well-furnished. He read slowly and doggedly, but constantly, all through his life. Here he is writing to George Orwell in 1949, when the latter, or his publisher, had sent a courtesy copy of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. "It arrived as I was in the midst of a piece of work that required much reading and consulting of references [presumably this was *Themes and Variations*, reproduced in Volume V of this *Complete Essays*]; and since poor sight makes it necessary for me to ration my reading, I had to wait a long time before being able to embark on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*."

The greatest impact of Huxley's near-blindness was on his scientific interests. He had originally intended a career as a doctor, until the problems with his sight put an end to the possibility. He might indeed have made a fine research scientist—an astronomer, perhaps, or a physicist. He felt himself to be that way inclined. "If I could be born again and choose what I should be in my next existence, I should desire to be a man of science. . . . [E]ven if I could be Shakespeare, I think I should still choose to be Faraday." It is very easy to imagine Huxley as the more thoughtful kind of scientist, perhaps turning in later life to the writing of good popular books about the origins of life and the future of the human race, like Freeman Dyson, or producing occasional startling science fiction novels, like Fred Hoyle. He sought out and enjoyed the company of scientific professionals—the astronomer Edwin Hubble, after whom the space telescope is named, was a close friend from 1937 until his sudden death (sitting in his car, in his driveway) in 1953.

Huxley was, I believe, a rather pure specimen of the natural-born scientist, equipped with the scientist's tireless curiosity and passion for classifying. *Point Counter Point*, the best of his literary novels, is almost comically a "novel of types"—the equivalent of Ponchielli's opera *La Gioconda*, which has six precisely equiponderant roles, one for each major vocal category. Unfortunately, the early failure of his sight denied Huxley the rigorous disciplines of the laboratory and the peer review. This threw him back on much more speculation *about* science than working scientists—young ones, at any rate—generally go in for, and thence toward the metaphysical imperative I stated up above. Edwin Burtt's *Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* was a favorite book. Huxley enthused about it in a 1925 letter to his father. He recommends it to the reader twelve years later, in the book of essays titled *Ends and Means*, and again in the 1946 collection *Science, Liberty and Peace*. This is also the book we find on the lap of Philip Quarles, Huxley's fictional self-portrait, when he is crossing the Red Sea by steamship in *Point Counter Point*. Burtt, whose dates were 1892–1989, was a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago when he published *Metaphysical Foundations* in 1924, bent on seeking what he called "an adequate philosophy of the mind" through a study of scientific revolutions and the thinkers who brought them about. Burtt's interests, prefiguring Huxley's, later turned to Eastern religion: his 1955 anthology of Buddhist scriptures is still in print today.

The frustration of Huxley's natural scientific bent also had at least one malign consequence: a much too uncritical attitude towards fringe and crank sciences, especially those that offered some hint of a connection to the world of the spirit. He was an early enthusiast for the work of Dr. J. B. Rhine of Duke University, which Huxley believed had established the reality of extra-sensory perception. Huxley's 1954 essay in *Life* magazine probably did more than anything else to bring Rhine's "results" (which rested

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on a misapplication of the rules of statistical inference) to the attention of the broad general public. J. W. Dunne's "experiments with time," which involved sifting through one's dreams for episodes of precognition, got Huxley's attention. So did dianetics, which was later incorporated into Scientology. Huxley and Maria, his first wife, had three or four sessions with L. Ron Hubbard.

The body-typing theories of William Sheldon, the academic psychologist who gave us the words "endomorph," "mesomorph," and "ectomorph," were another enthusiasm. Sheldon taught that every human physiognomy could be placed somewhere on a body-type triangle, with these extremes at its three vertices. Associated with each component of body type was a characteristic personality, which Sheldon named, respectively, "viscerotonic," "somatotonic," and "cerebrotonic." These words are scattered through Huxley's books, and must be very baffling to readers now, when Sheldon's theories have sunk into academic oblivion. Huxley classified himself as an extreme cerebrotonic ectomorph: he stood six feet four—perhaps another point of affinity with Hubble, who was six feet five.

Huxley is mainly remembered by the general public now for having written *Brave New World*, one of the two great admonitory novels of the twentieth century. It used to be, and for all I know may still be, a common classroom exercise for high school seniors to read Huxley's novel together with Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and then to express and justify an opinion about which is a more probable future for the human race. Huxley himself seems to have been in two minds about the matter. In his essay on the French metaphysician François-Pierre Maine de Biran (another "extreme cerebrotonic," by the way), Huxley notes that Orwell's forecast "was made from a vantage point considerably further down the descending spiral of modern history than mine, and is probably more nearly correct." However, in the 1949 letter to Orwell, Huxley argued that his own imagined future was the more probable one.

Most of us would agree with this latter opinion, I think. The great terror-despotisms of mid-century are a fading memory now. Their style lingers on in some minor Third World hell-holes in Africa or Arabia, but nobody bothers much about that. Those are barbarous places, of which little better can be expected. The shocking thing about the Nazi and Soviet terrors was that they had planted themselves in civilized European nations, the nations that had brought forth Goethe, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Tolstoy. If such things could happen there, they could happen anywhere —or, as in Orwell's novel, everywhere.

As Lenin and Hitler recede into history, the idea that a civilized nation can descend so deep into a totalitarianism maintained by fear seems less and less plausible. Huxley's dystopia, by contrast, is all too plausible. Indeed, the unsettling thing about Huxley's imagined future is that it is not easy for a modern reader to say what, exactly, is so bad about it. To be sure, we maintain our democracy, religion is still alive, and our inclination to join up in pairs and raise our own children seems to be ineradicable. In many other respects, though, we have settled happily into the infantile hedonism of *Brave New World*. Re-reading that novel recently after many years, I suddenly realized why it is that I find the current hit TV show *Friends* so unwatchable. In the World State of the year 632 After Ford, would not Phoebe, Chandler & Co. be model citizens? In the terms of that great Dostoyevskian exchange between the Savage and the Controller at the end of Chapter 17 in Huxley's masterpiece, we have come down pretty firmly on the side of the Controller, and trust to science to cope with whatever unpleasant consequences may attend our choice.

> "What?" questioned the Savage, uncomprehending.
>
> "It's one of the conditions of perfect health.

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> That's why we've made the V.P.S. treatments compulsory."
>
> "V.P.S.?"
>
> "Violent Passion Surrogate. Regularly once a month. We flood the whole system with adrenalin. It's the complete physiological equivalent of fear and rage. All the tonic effects of murdering Desdemona and being murdered by Othello, without any of the inconveniences."
>
> "But I like the inconveniences."
>
> "We don't," said the Controller. "We prefer to do things comfortably."

So do we, so do we.

Orwell was an essayist as accomplished as Huxley, though in a very different style. The two men barely knew each other, their closest contact having occurred in 1917–18, when Huxley taught at Eton, where Orwell was a pupil. The letter of thanks for *Nineteen Eighty-Four* seems to have been the only one from Huxley to Orwell; I do not know of any in the other direction. Huxley was of course an established writer while Orwell was shooting elephants on behalf of the Indian Imperial Police. I counted twenty-four references to the older man in *The Collected Essays, Letters and Journalism of George Orwell*, including a couple of prize say-*what?* Orwellisms. Sample, from a letter to Richard Rees: "You were right abt Huxley's book [*Ape and Essence*]—it is awful. And do you notice that the more holy he gets, the more his books stink with sex. He cannot get off the subject of flagellating women."

Orwell included Huxley among those writers he described as "inside the whale," that is, looking out at the world through a thick transparent layer of insulating blubber. The *Complete Essays* amply confirm this. Huxley does his conscientious best with social and political issues, but can never stay moored to plain fact for long. Soon, after a perfunctory paragraph or two, he soars off into lofty abstraction. This makes Huxley's social and political writing very tedious to read. Compare his detached, colorless description of a visit to a coal-mining region, recorded in the essay "Abroad in England," with the vivid immediacy of Orwell's similar excursions in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Similarly, while Gandhi's assassination inspired one of Orwell's finest essays, it brought forth no lengthy relections from Huxley, only some offhand remarks at the beginning of *Ape and Essence*. This is particularly striking since Huxley was a pacifist and admirer of Gandhi, while Orwell regarded the sage with mild contempt. Huxley seems not to have noticed Pearl Harbor, though he was living in California at the time.

So what *was* Huxley's metaphysics? His first sustained attempt to express his outlook in writing was the aforementioned 1937 book of essays, *Ends and Means*, reproduced here in its entirety. "It is a dull book," said Evelyn Waugh, reviewing it. He added: "There is no reason to suppose that in ten years' time [Huxley] will hold any of the opinions he holds today."

In this latter opinion, Waugh was mistaken. In fact, so far as metaphysics was concerned, Huxley seems at this point to have settled into the views that he held to for the rest of his life, and which led him to those well-known experiments with mind-altering drugs he conducted from 1953 onwards. (In the last hours of his death from cancer, Huxley asked for, and got, injections of LSD. He died under the influence.) *Ends and Means* is about a great many things—war, politics, religion, economics, and the beginnings of a concern with what we should nowadays call "the environment"—but it is all rooted in metaphysics. I took that starting quote in my second paragraph from *Ends and Means*.

Huxley adopted a philosophical outlook based on mysticism, most especially on Hindu and Buddhist concepts. There exists a single universal consciousness, the "Mind at Large," of which individual selves are manifestations, extrusions into the world of space, time, and language. It follows that our individual consciousnesses, our private selves, are in principle capable of ap-

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prehending the whole of reality. In *Doors of Perception*, Huxley quotes with approval the British philosopher C. D. Broad: "The function of the brain and the nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and otherwise irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive." Mind at Large, says Huxley himself, "has to be funneled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system." The contents of this much-reduced awareness are then encompassed and fixed (in the chemical sense: "to make nonvolatile or solid") by language, so that they are, by definition, all that language can cope with. Connoisseurs of pseudoscience will spot the parallels with dianetics here, though Huxley had formed his ideas long before Hubbard launched his own system on an unsuspecting world in the May 1950 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*.

The ethical problem raised by this outlook—the fact that the Mind at Large is impersonal, and therefore ethically neutral—is dealt with in *Ends and Means* by traditional Vedantic and Buddhist arguments. Though ultimate reality is neither good nor evil in itself, it is only by practicing goodness that one can hope to attain any real acquaintance with that reality. My impression, however—and I had better confess here that I find metaphysics tiresome, and may not have grasped the full subtlety of Huxley's exposition—is that the ethical side of things was never well thought out. The Huxley-mouthpiece character in the 1939 immortality novel *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, for example, argues that evil is intrinsically inherent in time, and that only by escaping from time can one approach goodness. It seems that in order to attain the sole state in which goodness dwells, we must practice goodness. . . . But, as I said, it may be my own understanding that is deficient here.

All of this was, in Huxley's case, pure intellection. He told Rosamond Lehmann in 1961 that he had never had a religious experience. He did not actually like religion, as a social phenomenon. "One is all for religion until one visits a really religious country." (He seems to have India in mind here.) Huxley took lessons in Indian techniques of meditation from Swami Prabhavananda at the Vedanta Society in Hollywood. He was not, though, willing to accept the Swami as a guru, nor to join with him in devotions to Hindu gods. Huxley was in fact strongly averse to the notion of religion grounded in culture. He sought the universal, the common denominator of religious experience. Writing of Simone Weil, he dismisses as irrelevant the question of whether or not she knew Sanskrit.

> [T]he Upanishads are not systems of pure speculation, in which the niceties of language are all important. They were written by Transcendental Pragmatists, as we may call them, whose concern was to teach a doctrine which could be made to "work," a metaphysical theory which could be operationally tested, not through perception only, but by a direct experience of the whole man on every level of his being. To understand the meaning of *tat tvam asi*, "thou art That," it is not necessary to be a profound Sanskrit scholar. (Similarly, it is not necessary to be a profound Hebrew scholar in order to understand the meaning of, "thou shalt not kill.")

One is not surprised to recall that this is the author who, thirty years earlier, had become the first (I feel pretty sure) to have a character in a novel mention Wittgenstein.

In this context, Sybille Bedford's account of Huxley's U.S. naturalization interview makes curious reading. The McCarran Act of 1952 had denied citizenship to any person who refused to bear arms for other than religious reasons. Aldous was a pacifist, and said so at the interview. Was he a religious man? asked the interviewing judge. "Aldous said that he was indeed a religious man; his opposition to war, however, was an entirely philosophical one." This particular metaphysical circle was never squared to the satisfaction of the immigration authorities;

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though he lived in the United States for the last twenty-six years of his life, Huxley never did get citizenship, and died a subject of the Crown.

Huxley himself, in the preface to a 1959 collection of his essays, gave it as his opinion that: "Essays belong to a literary species whose extreme variability can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference. There is the pole of the personal and autobiographical; there is the pole of the objective, the factual, the concrete-particular; and there is the pole of the abstract-universal." He goes on to elaborate a sort of Sheldonian classification for essayists, with Charles Lamb at the first vertex of the triangle, Macaulay at the second, and Bacon sharing the third with Emerson and Dr. Johnson. (I note in passing the absence of Hazlitt from this preface, and indeed from Huxley's works altogether. This seems odd to me. I should have thought the intellectual affinity quite strong.) Essayists of real genius, Huxley goes on to say, are those like Montaigne, who can roam easily between all three poles.

My impression is that Huxley saw himself as dwelling at that third pole with Bacon, Emerson, and Johnson. If I am right about this, he misjudged himself, as artists often do. Going through these essays now, decades after their first appearance, the "abstract-universal" writings make pretty dull reading. Even at the time they were published, in fact, they struck some very discerning readers that way, as Evelyn Waugh's remark illustrates. (*Ends and Means* is almost solidly "abstract-universal.") Huxley was actually at his best with some literary, artistic, or historical material to comment on, or when traveling.

The 1956 essay collection titled *Adonis and the Alphabet* offers especially rich pickings here. If the publisher of these volumes will forgive my saying so, in fact, I think a person who wanted to form a first acquaintance with "Aldous of the Essays" could do worse than find a second-hand copy of *Adonis*. (The *Adonis* essays are in Volume V of this set.) That comes with a slight qualification. By this stage of Huxley's life, metaphysics had become a hobby-horse, and many of the essays end with a little coda, relating the principal theme to the need for "direct experience of the basic fact of the divine immanence," or "knowledge of the Whole within." After a few encounters with this sort of thing, though, the reader learns to disregard these metaphysical flourishes, rather as one does the compulsory moment of sappiness at the end of a traditional TV sitcom, and just enjoy the body of the thing.

Here in *Adonis* is the essay titled "Ozymandias," the strange, atmospheric tale of the short-lived Llano del Rio socialist commune, where "everything that ought not to have been done was systematically done." Here is "Hyperion to a Satyr," an amusing and instructive discourse on dirt, halitosis, and cognate topics. Here is a wittily and, to this musical ignoramus, inexplicably fascinating piece on the Neapolitan composer Carlo Gesualdo (1560–1613), whose first marriage had an abrupt ending when the lady took a lover. Gesualdo broke into his wife's room, slew her and her lover, then "took horse and galloped off to one of his castles where, after liquidating his second child (the one of doubtful paternity), he remained for several months . . . to avoid the private vengeance of the Avalos and Carafa families."

Adonis also has some fine travel pieces. The title essay, in fact, was inspired by a visit to the site of ancient Byblos. Huxley was quite an accomplished travel writer, and four of these six volumes have separate sections headed "Travel." (I should explain that the general system of organization adopted by the editors has been to group the essays in each volume under three or four broad thematic headings, breaking up the original volumes of essays as necessary.) He early developed a fine contrarian attitude toward the great spectacles of the tourist trail. Of the Golden Temple of the Sikhs: "Holiness and costliness make up for any lack of architectural merit. For architecturally the

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temple is less than nothing." This is merely a warm-up for his assault on the Taj Mahal:

> [I]ts elegance is at the best of a very dry and negative kind. Its "classicism" is the product not of intellectual restraint imposed on an exuberant fancy but of an actual deficiency of fancy, a poverty of imagination. One is struck at once by the lack of variety in the architectural forms of which it is composed. . . . When the Taj is compared with more or less contemporary European buildings in the neoclassic style of the High Renaissance and Baroque periods, this poverty in the formal elements composing it becomes very apparent.

Any idea that Huxley's failure to appreciate the Taj Mahal might have been due to his limited eyesight is soon dispelled by reading his art criticism, most especially, I think, the earlier pieces in this line. Poor as his eyes may have been, they did not hinder him from developing a comprehensive knowledge of art, built on a sound esthetic sense. (Nor, come to think of it, from marrying a very beautiful woman when he was young and penniless.) Huxley sketched and painted as a hobby, at least into his early forties. All his writing is sprinkled with judiciously-chosen metaphors from art, as in this crisp piece of travel writing from *Beyond the Mexique Bay*. The location here is Honduras.

> We came back from the ruins to find the entire population of Copán clustered round our aeroplane, like a crowd of Breughel's peasants round a crucifixion. Some were standing; some, with the air of people who had come out for a long day's pleasure, were sitting in the shade of our wings and picnicking. They were a villainous set of men and women; not Indian, but low *ladino*, squalid and dirty as only a poverty-stricken half-caste, with a touch of white blood and a sense of superiority to all the traditional decencies of the inferior race, can be dirty and squalid. Before the doors of the cabin stood half a dozen ruffians, looking like the Second Murderers of Elizabethan drama, and armed with genuinely antique muskets of the American Civil War pattern. The local police.

What is left of all this now? Those "objective, factual, and concrete-particular" essays aside, *Brave New World* aside, and the (to my taste) much faded ironical charm of the early fiction likewise, what else is there in Huxley's work that can be read for enlightenment or inspiration by a person of our time? I am sorry to say that I think the answer is: very little. Whether this speaks worse of Huxley, or of us, I am not sure.

The abiding impression one is left with after reading through 2,907 pages of Huxley's nonfiction writing is one of *seriousness*. That is not, I hasten to add, the same as unrelieved earnestness. Huxley was not a humorless man, as the early novels and short stories amply testify, and the lighter essays occasionally confirm. His style included something of a talent for throw-away apothegms: "Ignorance is no deterrent to the hardened journalist," for example. He was a satirist of genius; the description of the California cemetery in *After Many a Summer* must surely have given Evelyn Waugh the idea for his own dark comedy *The Loved One*. Huxley had, in fact, a well-developed sense of the absurd, and that conviction—I always associate it with G. K. Chesterton, though it is of course more widespread—that the universe is radically weird. Comments to this effect turn up again and again in Huxley's writing: "the astonishingness of the most obvious things," "the unutterably odd facts of human experience," etc. He was much tickled to find, when typing one day, that his left hand had slipped from "c" to "v," giving him the phrase: "the human vomedy."

Huxley described himself as "by temperament extremely anti-social," but he was not anhedonic, and the pleasure he took in art, literature, close friendships, and the ordinary processes of life, are plain to see in his writings. He was, though, a bookish intellectual with chronically poor eyesight,

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and his pleasures were mostly of the private and interior kind. "Fulfilled, domestic duties are a source of happiness, and intellectual labor is rewarded by the most intense delights," he wrote in 1931. "It is not the hope of heaven that prevents me from leading what is technically known as a life of pleasure; it is simply my temperament. I happen to find the life of pleasure boring and painful."

This fundamentally serious nature manifested itself in a lifelong concern with the question: How should we live? The reason for the current irrelevance of most of Huxley's thinking is that, over the past fifty years, the Western world's educated middle classes have arrived at an answer of their own that satisfies the great majority of them fairly well, and this answer implicitly repudiates most of Huxley's ideas.

We should live, we have decided, in modest hedonism, tempered and constrained by a similarly modest respect for traditional moral precepts, these latter encapsulated, for those of us so inclined, in established religious observances. We entrust the keeping of the peace to armies and diplomats, not to idealists. We entrust our social order to policemen and judges, not to hopes for universal moral improvement. We seek personal fulfillment in work, hobbies, child-raising, and service to others, not in the pursuit of Nirvana. If we want to read about human types, we pick up *Psychology Today*, not a novel. For the latest insights into human nature, we go to Professor Pinker, not to writers of literary essays. Mind-altering drugs? They mess up your life. Demographic or ecological catastrophe? We'll science our way out of it. Metaphysics? Hey, we don't even understand *physics* any more! Leave that stuff to the experts, they'll sort it out.

Undoubtedly there is a worm in this rosy apple somewhere. In human affairs, there always is. The End of History is invariably an illusion; when one chess game stops, another starts immediately. This cheerful embourgeoisement of the world will proceed for a few more years, then take a wrong turn somehow, spreading misery and desperation among people raised in comfort and security, as the traumas of 1914–45 did to Huxley's generation. Until then, though, we are not in a very serious frame of mind, and seriousness on the Huxley scale does not much interest us.

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The anatomy of murder

by Theodore Dalrymple

One way and another, I meet quite a lot of murderers. Their crimes are merely sordid: there is nothing about them that remotely brings to mind De Quincey's famous essay, "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts." The passions that lead to modern murder have no grandeur, tragic or otherwise, about them: they are low, savage and frequently drunken, symptomatic of modern man's emotional life, which is intense but shallow and changeable. It isn't surprising that, in my experience at least, remorse seldom lasts longer than a few days, though regret and bitterness at the consequences of the act of murder may last rather longer.

The means employed in modern murder have nothing artistic or romantic about them either: a kitchen knife in the spleen or a punch to the face, succeeded by a blow to the head struck by the waiting curbside. Sometimes one longs for a little more refinement, and very occasionally, it is true, one meets a poisoner: for example, a vet who was accused of putting his wife down with horse anaesthetic, who was subsequently acquitted when an equivocal suicide note in his dead wife's hand was found hidden in a bookcase; or a woman who dissolved the contents of her antidepressant capsules into cough syrup and fed them to her sleeping daughter through a syringe into the mouth, so that her estranged husband should have no access to her—a variant of the if-I-can't-have-her-no-one-else-will type of murder. (Her method was deemed so original that the court gave her only three years' probation as "punishment"—for once the scare quotes are fully justified.) And a friend and colleague of mine has become a recognized expert on murder by insulin, fatally administered by nurses to those—including crippled husbands—who are delivered into their care. Though conceptually simple, such murders present forensic difficulties for technical reasons. But the fact remains that murders whose method is anything other than both obvious and brutal remain very few and far between.

As for the motive of murder, it is rarely less transparent and inglorious than the means employed. Those who kill for insurance money, for example, can seldom wait longer than a couple of weeks after increasing the sum insured from, say, $26,000 to $1,230,000: the desire to avoid unnecessary premium payments giving even our police force, with its rule-and-procedure helplessness brought about by decades of civil libertarian lobbying, a clue of probative value. But by far the most common motive is lust combined with wounded *amour propre*.

Was it ever thus? I suspect that it was, human nature being what it is, though the prevalence of illicit desire and the frequency with which it is acted upon may change, usually (these days) in the direction of increase. The murder rate has doubled since 1960, and an article in a recent issue of the

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learned journal *Homicide Studies*—how long can it be before homicide is a university subject, study of which leads to a D. Hom.?—suggested that, had it not been for improvements in surgical technique since 1960, the murder rate would be five times higher than it is, that is to say, ten times higher than it was in 1960: a conclusive proof, if any were needed, that technical and moral progress do not necessarily go hand in hand.

The literature of murder also reflects a social change. I take as my texts almost at random two crime novels, the first published in 1931, *Malice Aforethought*, by Francis Iles (the pseudonym of Anthony Berkeley Cox), and the second published in 1990, *Hide and Seek*, by Ian Rankin. In *Malice Aforethought*, murder is an unexpected irruption into an ordered and orderly world; in *Hide and Seek*, murder is the natural consequence of the way we live now. It is the continuation of relationships by other means. The books describe two social worlds—universes apart.

It is almost as if we had travelled (in our murder literature, at least) in precisely the direction opposite to that recommended by De Quincey's fictional lecturer to the Society of Connoisseurs in Murder, published in 1827:

> People begin to see that something more goes to the composition of a fine murder than two blockheads to kill and be killed, a knife, a purse, and a dark lane. Design, gentlemen, grouping, light and shade, poetry and sentiment, are now deemed indispensable to attempts of this nature.

Nowadays, on the contrary, we prefer the crude, brutal, and arbitrary, as being more real, more genuine, than the subtle, the feline, and the meaningful. In the name of sophistication, we like the primitive: though the problem with our *nostalgie de la boue* is that, eventually, it submerges us all in real, genuine *boue*.

In both *Malice Aforethought* and *Hide and Seek* the victims of murder die by injection of heroin, but the social milieu in which they expire could hardly be more different. The first dies in a cozy English village called Wyvern's Cross, the second in a squalid tenement squat in Edinburgh. The first has lived in a world in which social distinctions are both fine and pluridimensional, the second in a world in which social distinctions are determined by the possession of money alone, for which the scramble is both universal and utterly ruthless. Both worlds have their dishonesties, but while in one they give rise to irony and humor, in the other they give rise to nothing but hatred, despair, and disgust. The first has its defects, but the second has no charms. Thus the two books taken together chart, without either having intended to do so, the trajectory of British society: a change I have seen in my own lifetime. I was born into the remains of the first, and am now immersed—professionally—in the second of these worlds.

Dr. Bickleigh, the "hero" of *Malice Aforethought*, is the doctor in Wyvern's Cross; and while he has gone up in the social scale, his wife, a penniless frigid harpy, has gone down in it. Although—or perhaps because—she is completely dependent upon him financially, she never lets him forget that he is her social inferior, just as she never forgets her own aristocratic pretensions:

> Before her marriage Mrs. Bickleigh had been a Crewstanton. She was, in everything but name, a Crewstanton still. During their short engagement she had informed her fiancé not once, but several times, with the air of one imparting interesting information, that her grandmother would no more have contemplated sitting down to a meal with her doctor than with her butler.

Not surprisingly, the Bickleighs' marriage is less than a happy one, one of inconvenient convenience. But they take their part in the life of the village, whose petty snobberies and little hypocrisies are subtly indicated by the author, who subjects them to affec-

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tionate and amused, which is to say unembittered, criticism. The Bickleighs, for example, are holding a tennis party:

> [They] had only one court, but out of those invited at least half did not play tennis at all. An invitation to tennis in rural England does not imply any ability to play the game; the dividing line between those asked to tennis parties and those not asked is a social, not an athletic one.

The village is full of individuals who are by no means all admirable, though their foibles, none of them amounting to serious vice, distinctly add to the gaiety of life. The local vicar, for example, the Reverend Hessary Torr, who "was inclined to take himself more seriously than his duties," is that familiar figure, the man with a brilliant academic record who, against expectations, has never achieved anything in later life. His pomposity and self-importance are not admirable, of course, yet a world in which the following exchange between him and Dr. Bickleigh could not take place is an impoverished one:

> "And how," said Mr. Torr with majestic grace, "is old Mrs. Brent today?" He remembered vaguely having heard recently that old Mrs. Brent really was bad this time, and the village clergyman should always keep himself informed about his charges, however humble. Besides, Bickleigh would like to talk about one of his patients; professional men always talk shop.
>
> But Dr. Bickleigh was looking embarrassed. "Today?" he repeated awkwardly. "Well—she's still dead, you know. I mean, you buried her last week, you remember."
>
> "Chrrrm-hrrrm!" observed Mr. Torr with severity. One gathered that it was tactless of Mrs. Brent to have died in any case, but it was far, far more tactless of Dr. Bickleigh that Mr. Torr should have forgotten all about it.

Wyvern's Cross is a little society of deeply conventional morality. When a rich and unattached young woman called Madeleine Cranmere takes the long-vacated Hall, intending to live there alone, the village tongues, including those of Miss Wapsworthy and Miss Peavy, are set wagging about this gross breach of propriety. And "The Vicar was reputed to be distinctly concerned about it."

Miss Cranmere is so exceedingly rich, however, that everyone soon finds her charming, and not at all lacking in respectability, despite the fact that she is clearly a flighty hysteric of elastic morals. The hypocrisy shown by the inhabitants of Wyvern's Cross may not be a virtue, but it does show at least two things: that they still have a scale of values to which they believe that they and others ought to adhere, and a certain mental flexibility.

In fact, behind the appearance of social rigidity, there is a great deal of hidden, clear-eyed, and unsentimental tolerance. No one could appear more unbending in public than Mrs. Bickleigh, ill-favored by nature (she is taller than her diminutive and physically insignificant husband), old before her time, shrewish, censorious, and desiccated. Yet she turns a blind eye to her husband's continual philandering, his attempts to bolster his self-respect by repetitive sexual conquest. It is only when he sets his sights on Miss Cranmere up at the Hall that she objects, for she rightly sees it as a threat to the continuation of their marriage:

> "Are you intending to try to seduce that gairl, Edmund?" asked Julia without emotion.
>
> Consternation, real anger, and a sickly, choking terror, clogged Dr. Bickleigh's utterance for a moment. "Look here, Julia—" he began in shrill, unnatural tones.
>
> "Oh, you needn't bother to pretend to me," cut in his wife, her pale, prominent eyes contemptuous behind their thick glasses. "I know perfectly well you're not fit to be trusted with any decent gairl. Normally, I think you'll admit, I don't interfere with your amusements. If a gairl is fool enough to be taken in by a man like you, she must learn her lesson. But in this case, I warn you, I will not permit it."

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Unfortunately, Dr. Bickleigh is not so clear-sighted. Although it is obvious to any observer of his behavior that the function of his dalliances is to soothe an ego that has been badly bruised by his humble origins and small stature (and the inhabitants of Wyvern's Cross are perfectly aware of his character), he is prey to romantic illusions. Before he fell for Madeleine at the Hall, he had been in love with Gwynyfryd Rattery, the unmarried daughter of a grumpy retired colonel:

> Dr. Bickleigh was quite genuine in his feelings. He did not doubt that he was deeply in love with Gwynyfryd, and that she was the one woman in the world whom he ought to have married. The fact that he had been looking for this one woman so long made his discovery of her all the more poignant; the fact that he had been certain so often before of having found her elsewhere did not affect the matter in the least.

The combination of Mrs. Bickleigh's sudden proscription of an affair, together with his romantic illusion, seals her fate. Dr. Bickleigh repeatedly sprinkles her food with a powder that gives her a terrible headache that he then treats with morphine. Before long, she is addicted, and seeks out the morphine herself. He is then able to present the fatal injection that he gives her as self-administered.

Nevertheless, rumors begin to circulate, because "One does not have to gossip in a place like Wyvern's Cross. It inserts itself into the consciousness somehow, quite irrespective of the ears."

Eventually, the rumors about Dr. Bickleigh reach the police, who are portrayed as upright and diligent, and whose slow stolidity masks a keen intelligence that in the end entraps Dr. Bickleigh and brings him to court. The agents of the state and the law are not time-serving poltroons, but men performing their duty because they believe in the fundamental goodness of what they uphold. The final twist is that Dr. Bickleigh is acquitted of the murder he has committed, only to be hanged shortly afterwards for a murder he hasn't: when Madeleine's newly-wed husband dies of typhoid, Dr. Bickleigh is convicted wrongly of having procured his death by administering the germs to him. Thus justice of a kind is done: and we are left with the sophisticated (and true) message that, while the world is not just, neither is it totally unjust. We therefore need a measured and prudent response to it. Criticism is possible without subversion, and hence we are not left with a feeling of utter desolation.

Murder in Wyvern's Cross is illuminating precisely because it illustrates the operation of passion and lack of scruple in a civilized, though imperfect, social world. Because the inhabitants of Wyvern's Cross have moral prejudices, and standards of conduct however loosely adhered to in practice, because they understand that life as it is displayed in public not only is but ought to be different from how it is lived in private, *Malice Aforethought* is not only a murder mystery, but a comedy of manners.

Hide and Seek, set in the Edinburgh of 1990, is not a comedy of manners because there are no standards left to satirize. The permissibility of everything means that tolerance has transmuted itself into mere indifference: and indifference is the harbinger of radical egotism. Unfortunately, radical egotism, by making whim the measure of all things, reduces men to the same elemental level: they have no individuality or character, whatever their station in life. The loss of social constraints, roles and obligations, far from freeing the human personality so that it may flourish, first flattens and then destroys it. And because there is no socially accepted conception of how things ought to be, there is no contrast between how they are and how they ought to be, and hence no humor: the great consolation of imperfection. The writing in *Hide and Seek*, as a consequence, is flat and lacking in irony. It is a world of numbing literal-mindedness.

In *Hide and Seek*, a young drug addict

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called Ronnie is found dead of a heroin overdose in a decomposing Edinburgh squat. It is a death that in no way distinguishes it initially from a hundred other such deaths, but in fact it is a murder: the heroin with which he injected himself was deliberately contaminated. The hero of the book, Inspector Rebus, traces the ramifications of his death and finds only layer upon layer of evil, reaching from the bottom of society to the top. Everyone is corrupt (save Rebus), from the junkies to the judges, from the police to the politicians, and only vice is real. It is a world in which goodness is radically impossible and indeed pointless. When Rebus finally discovers who has murdered Ronnie, nothing comes of it, because the trail of brute dissipation leads to people too powerful to be exposed. The superstructure of polished and elegant Edinburgh rests upon an infrastructure of squalor, vice, and injustice (for example, a subterranean club in which the rich burghers and professionals of the city enjoy the spectacle of rent-boys trying to batter each other to death bare-knuckle in a boxing ring, before retiring to private chambers to have sex with the victors). The refinement of Edinburgh—and, by extension, of life itself—is only apparent, but the nihilistic brutality is real.

This point is made explicitly in the book by a student at Edinburgh University called Charlie, the son of rich parents, who is questioned by Rebus about his association with the dead man:

> "I met him around the time of my first-year exams. That was when I started to get interested in the REAL Edinburgh."
>
> "The real Edinburgh?"
>
> "Yes. Not just the piper on the ramparts, or the Royal Mile, or the Scott Monument."

Of course, it is an elementary error to assume that the opinions of a character are those of an author; but the fact is that there is nothing in the rest of the book to suggest any other standpoint. On this view, Burke and Hare, the infamous providers of dead bodies to Edinburgh anatomists, were real, but Allan Ramsay and Raeburn were not.

Edinburgh University being an elite institution, it is instructive, though not encouraging, to learn how those who attend it now speak, or at least are thought by this author to speak. There are two reasons for thinking his depiction is accurate, however: first because the author himself attended the university not very many years before the action in his book, and second because, Scotland being a small country with a long history of carping, plausibility in a Scottish author requires accuracy. This is the response of Charlie, the finest flower of modern elite education, to his questioning by Inspector Rebus: "Look, what is all this? Ronnie OD'd. He's history. Why all the questions?" Not only is there no respect for, let alone fear of, the agent of the law in his attempt to elucidate an untoward death, but the manner in which the dead man is referred to indicates an attitude to others that is crudely instrumental. These are the words of a raving egotist living in a solipsistic universe who, maddened by the belief in the plethora of his own rights, therefore has no recognition, let alone respect for, the sanctity of the life of others.

The impoverishment and debasement of the language he uses faithfully reflects the impoverishment and debasement of his intellectual, emotional, and ethical world. Asked by Rebus about Tracy, a female acquaintance of the dead man's, he says: "Tracy. Yeah, what a loser that woman is. She never understood Ronnie. Never even tried." Here we witness the devastating effect that the adoption of psychobabble has had not just upon speech, but upon thought itself: the resort to language with connotation but no denotation being one of the besetting sins of our age.

The book reflects the excremental philosophy of life: all flesh is shit. Our noses are repeatedly rubbed in excremental reality. When, in the course of his duties, Rebus rushes into the street in his stockinged feet,

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he slips (unnecessarily to the plot): but not on ice or moisture, of course. "When he looked down, he saw what it was he had skidded on." He did not then behave like a good citizen, but simply as another aggrieved egotist: "he removed his socks, tossed them into the gutter, and walked on his bare feet back to his flat." Someone—or no one—else could clean up after him.

As for vice—drug-taking, public exhibitions of sadism, male prostitution, corruption, and so forth—it is, as it has always been, with us: a reflection that leads not to a call for a struggle against what lies buried or potential within each of us but to a supposedly sophisticated surrender to it.

Hide and Seek is neither satire nor scathing social commentary (there is no suggestion in it that anything either should or could be any different from how it is), but rather an exhibitionist display of knowing and disabused realism. It is a dance of the seven veils, without the veils. It is a product of the modern fear that, by believing in common decency, for example, one is revealing oneself as ignorant and naïve, and probably a hypocrite to boot. This fear is what gives popularity to an entire genre of modern detective fiction: one participates vicariously, even perhaps a little longingly, in supposedly genuine reality.

The genre both thus describes and helps to create, or at least to spread, a certain kind of reality, until indeed it will be the only reality that there is. After all, the rich kid Charlie at Edinburgh University did not have an original mind: he got his ideas from somewhere. But the burden of my complaint is not so much that *Hide and Seek* will have an undesirable effect, and will corrupt the minds of the foolish, but that it captures its reality only too well: a reality with which I am, unfortunately, very familiar. Hence my criticism is more of the world than of the book.

Malice Aforethought also captured a social reality, however, a social reality of which I caught the fag-end, as it were. In the book, men address each other by their surnames, as I addressed my fellow-pupils at school when I was a child. The language in which disapproval is expressed in the book was still current when I was a child. When a young woman, discussing Dr. Bickleigh's character with a young man, says "He really is rather sweet, isn't he?," he replies: "Is he? I think he's an awful little worm." This is exactly how I and my peers talked as a child, learning early in life to express a limited and ironical disdain and disapproval, untinged by bitterness or hatred. Though we could not have known it at the time, it was vastly more sophisticated than what was to come later, that is to say the instant resort to crude abuse. Since we were not the originators of this language, but merely the inheritors of it, this means that we were born into a society more truly sophisticated than the one that exists now, for all its technical accomplishments and multicultural relativism.

Malice Aforethought also describes a hierarchical society, into whose dying gasp I was born. It was not an entirely comfortable society to be born into, unless one happened to be born into the top of the hierarchy, which by definition very few of us were: indeed, it created a permanent state of anxiety, at least for those with ambition, lest one made a faux pas in one's attempted ascent. But the point about this society was that it did offer the possibility of ascent, in which the accumulation of money was no doubt a necessary but certainly not a sufficient condition. It offered the vision of a richer, superior way of life that was not merely the enjoyment of greater comfort and more gadgetry, but entailed certain values, many though not all of which were in themselves admirable. It was a sophisticated social settlement which nobody had devised, at least from a blueprint. It was not entirely rational, in the sense that a syllogism is rational, but—what is incomparably more important—it was deeply civilized. And *Malice Aforethought* is a civilized book, though it relates a dastardly crime.

By the time we reach *Hide and Seek*,

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everything has been smashed up, wilfully as it were. Mrs. Bickleigh in *Malice Aforethought* is described as a drug-fiend, that is to say an exceptional and indeed exotic creature: Ronnie in *Hide and Seek* is just another junkie, one of hundreds of thousands, with no character to call his own. The reality has well and truly changed, but not for the better.

Oh, I could out-squalor Ian Rankin any day, every day of my working life in fact. How about the young girl from a middle-class family who, dazzled by evil, ran away from home at the age of fifteen to join the prostitutes and was picked up by two Pakistani pimps who gave her heroin to get her hooked, but upon which she overdosed and died? The pimps, in whose house she died, called their legal adviser, who gave them the advice that any pimp's lawyer would give: dump her body in the local reservoir.

Or how about the two men, father and son, who gave heroin to a friend who promptly stopped breathing? They gave him mouth-to-mouth, and got him going again, and then left him on their sofa, only to discover two hours later that he was dead. They put him in their attic, until the smell of decomposition drew the attention of neighbors to his presence.

On the very day I wrote this, I had two patients who had heroin stories. One had taken heroin with a friend and when he woke up his friend was dead beside him. The second had watched his father, in his late forties, choke to death on his own vomit after injecting himself with heroin. I think I know about squalor.

Squalor disgusts me, but not quite as much as the excremental philosophy that squalor is all that truly exists, that it was ever thus, and thus it will ever be. Only a civilization in decay can justify its own squalor in this fashion.

Lest anyone should think that not to adopt the excremental philosophy is a manifestation of a lack of acquaintance with the horror of life, I should point out that Anthony Berkeley Cox was gassed in the trenches during the Great War and never recovered his health. Ian Rankin was born in 1960, and it is therefore unlikely that he could ever have experienced anything remotely comparable in horror to being gassed in the trenches, certainly nothing that he did not seek out for himself. Thus the excremental philosophy is chosen, not imposed upon us by the nature of existence. Our problem is that so many have chosen it.

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A mild & harmless relativism?

by Scott Campbell

Extreme relativism probably isn't explicitly accepted by even the most scatterbrained of postmodernists or sociologists of science. Most postmodern views certainly lead to extreme relativism, and in some cases amount to little more than extreme relativism expressed in the most indirect and pretentious manner possible, but postmodernists do their best to hide these facts from themselves and will rarely admit to any such view when pressed, at least in public. But plenty of people, postmodern or otherwise, would profess to accept some sort of mild, limited relativism. What's more, such views are no longer restricted to disgruntled left-wingers who are overly susceptible to the latest intellectual fashions. Plenty of sober, considered, and conservative thinkers now think of themselves as accepting some form of limited relativism.

A typical example of this phenomenon appeared in the pages of Australia's bastion of serious conservative thought, the journal *Quadrant*: "Relativism and the Right" by Sam Roggeveen, March 2000. Not only does Roggeveen defend a form of mild relativism, he also deliberately presents himself as a model of restraint, caution, and reason. We can take it, then, as a useful starting point for a discussion of "mild" relativism. Roggeveen claims that what he is defending is a "relativism of sorts":

> It is a relativism which says that there is such a thing as truth, but that this truth is contingent, dependent on particular inescapable historical circumstances or *horizons*, and is therefore not *objective* truth in the sense of being eternal or immutable. It is truth in the context of traditions, and leads to what might be called "bounded" relativism. Bounded relativism argues that it is impossible for individuals to completely step outside themselves to make objective observations about their existence, and that therefore humanity can never fully escape subjectivism. But tradition, by giving the world context, marks out the boundaries within which there can be such a thing as truth, and therefore protects us from the extremes of radical relativism. Tradition gives sense and meaning to the relativist universe, and thereby makes relativism bearable.

Roggeveen presents his position as a moderate, reasonable view that eschews the extremes of postmodern thought, while preserving what is sensible in it. And coming after the sort of off-putting and garish salami-down-the-pants display that many postmodern authors affect, such a view could well charm its way into the intellectual underpants of many otherwise judicious people. Let me then expose this would-be seducer for the dim-witted undergraduate that it is.

Take Roggeveen's claim that "truth is contingent." Many *truths*, to be sure, are contingent, which no one would deny. "Most of our cars run on four tires" is a contingent truth because it could have been

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otherwise; it is not necessarily so. But what Roggeveen seems to have in mind by saying that truth is contingent is not this sort of serene commonplace, but a far darker piece of philosophical necromancy. According to the "bounded relativist," from the perspective of a group of people who have different "traditions" or "practices" or "horizons" than we do, it is not true that most of our cars run on four tires. For them it may well be true that most of our cars run on three tires, or seven (or perhaps to them a car is a species of giraffe). What would it be like to meet such people? I'd like to see how they go about counting tires. And maybe play a few hands of poker with them.

Such a scenario only has to be stated for its absurdity to leap up and bite your nose off and then invite you out to dinner wearing a suit made of fish scales. It is hard to see how it varies from the sort of extreme relativism that Roggeveen professes to reject. Perhaps he would say, "But these people might have built their own cars differently." Well, so they might. But "most of our cars run on four tires" is not about any possible cars that might have been built by other people, which, after all, may be powered by plasma engines and have twelve tires and be made of super-hardened cheese. It is about those cars that have been actually built upon this planet, and most of them happen to run on four tires.

In my experience, at this point the "mild relativist" will change the topic and start talking about values, about cultural norms, about the interpretation of human behavior, and will ask how I can suppose there to be objective truth in these matters. But this is just an evasion. The debate between postmodernists and "objectivists" is not limited to ethical and cultural matters and the like. It is supposed to apply to all areas where claims to truth are made—with the exception perhaps of mathematics and deductive logic (although I have recently seen an academic claim in print that mathematical "truths" are just conventions).

If there are at least *some* objective truths, as "most of our cars run on four tires" surely is, then Roggeveen's claim that truth cannot be objective—that is, that truth is necessarily relative to a "tradition" or a "practice"—is false. The most that can then be claimed by a relativist is that there is no objective truth in regard to certain subject areas, such as ethics, a much weaker and less radical position than that there is no objective truth, full stop.

A lot of the bafflement about "objective truth" seems to arise from a confusion about just what this term means, and this confusion is spreading—and spreading, as one would expect, concurrently with the permeation of postmodernism. Roggeveen, for instance, says truth is not objective "in the sense of being eternal and immutable." Let us test this on an ordinary statement, such as "George W. Bush is the President of the United States of America." In one way, it is true that this statement is not an eternal or immutable truth. Taken exactly as stated, that is, without temporal specification, it will be false in one-hundred years time. This is a triviality, though, and hardly amounts to relativism.

In another way, though, the statement is eternal and immutable. If it is taken as implicitly referring to a certain time—as the speaker would probably have intended it to be—then it is an eternal and immutable truth. In a million years time, no matter how much some people may wish it to be otherwise, it will still be true that George W. Bush was President in 2003. Nothing that happens subsequently can alter this fact, nor can it be false in some other "tradition." (It may turn out that in the future it is discovered that George W. Bush never was President, and that the whole thing was a mass delusion orchestrated by the media, but in that case the statement "George W. Bush is the President of the United States" was never true in the first place, not even in a relative way, and so this possibility is irrelevant to the issue.)

Much confusion is also spread by the use of the term "absolute." Who has not heard a perfectly good discussion become a gibber-

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ing wreck once someone starts fulminating against "absolute truth?" What causes any debate that involves "absolute truth" to derail immediately is that the term, strictly speaking, makes no sense, and yet at the same time there seems to be something right about the complaint against it. The problem here lies in a confusion between what philosophers call metaphysics and epistemology.

Truth is just truth. It doesn't come in different grades or strengths like alcohol. Despite what certain "fuzzy logicians" think, a statement can't be true to some degree, whether 100 percent or 75 percent or 47.3 percent. "My window is made of glass," for example, is just plain true—it isn't absolutely true, or non-absolutely true, it's just true. Any talk of degrees of truth is loose talk that cannot be taken literally. For example, we might say that it is "mostly true" that an apple is red, if the apple is mostly red. Strictly speaking, though, it is *not* true that the apple is red, given that "red" means "red all over." (If, though, you think that "red" in such a context can mean "all or mostly red," then it is true—not just mostly true, but true—that the apple is red.)

Even though the statement "the apple is red" is false, however, it can be said to be "mostly true" in a *loose sense* because it is *closer* to the truth than a statement such as "the apple is blue." That is, the state of affairs it depicts is more similar to what actually exists than the state of affairs depicted by the statement "the apple is blue." Strictly speaking, though, the statement "the apple is red," is, like the statement "the apple is blue," false.

There is also another loose sense in which we talk of partial truth: we sometimes say of theories or sets of statements that they are mostly or partially true. What this amounts to, though (if it does not just mean, as above, that the theory is not true but is nevertheless close to the truth), is that some of the statements in the theory (or set) are true, and some are false. But this does not entail that a *statement* can be partially true.

Any propositional statement is, then, either true or false (presuming it is not meaningless), and so denunciations of "absolute truth" are about as relevant to the issue of relativism as Margaret Mead's conclusions were relevant to actual life in Samoa. Any statement that is true, in whatever field, is no more or less true than the statement "most of our cars run on four tires" is.

Nor is it "impossible," as Roggeveen claims it is,

> for individuals to completely step outside themselves to make objective observations about their existence, and that therefore humanity can never fully escape subjectivism.

One hears this sort of claim being made all the time these days. But it's clearly false—I can easily make objective observations about myself. I have two ears, for instance. What's subjective or relative about that? (It's only subjective in the sense that it's *my* belief about *myself*, but why should that mean that it can't be a true and objective claim?) I don't mean to suggest that I have in my possession all the objective facts about myself—no doubt I don't, and no doubt I have a number of false beliefs about myself—but that does not mean that I cannot know some objective facts about myself.

It seems to me that what may lie behind the relativist's views about "absolutism," and is perhaps what makes these views seem hard for many people to dismiss to their entire satisfaction, is a point about knowledge: our justification for accepting a statement comes in degrees. For instance, I have more reason to think that Ronald Reagan was once President of the United States than I do to think that Christopher Marlowe wrote Shakespeare's plays. In neither case can I claim to be absolutely certain. Perhaps Reagan's apparent presidency was just one of those media-induced hallucinations I mentioned earlier (hardly likely, but possible). But clearly I have more justification in the one case than in the other.

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If this matter is what the relativist has (however confusedly) in mind when he rails against "absolute truth," then he is right—there are few statements about which we can fairly claim to be 100 percent certain. And our warrant for accepting statements certainly varies from case to case. But these points are not ones that any objectivist should disagree with, and they sure as hell don't add up to relativism. Nor do they show that truth comes in degrees, for our warrant for accepting a statement (which does come in degrees) is a different matter from whether the statement is true or false.

Let us turn our attention to the spheres of ethics, culture, and politics, that is, to those areas that concern themselves with values. It has to be said that anti-objectivism in this sphere is a more coherent position than is anti-objectivism in regard to truth, and one that is strengthened by the fact that there is no obvious way—and there certainly seems to be no scientific, empirical way—of discovering objective values. What is coherent here, however, seems to be captured not by moral relativism but by what is called moral "anti-realism," or moral skepticism. This is the view that there exist no moral values, or, to put it another way, that there are no truths about moral values. This view does not, of course, deny that there exist *beliefs* about moral values, such as the belief that torture is wrong—what it claims is that these beliefs are all false. There are no facts about whether any act really is right or wrong.

The moral relativist, if he is not just expressing a disguised or confused form of moral anti-realism, is claiming that there *do* exist moral values (that is, that there *are* moral truths)—not just *beliefs* about moral *values*, but actual, genuine moral values (or moral truths)—only these values are in some way relative. On this view, the claim that torture is wrong may be true for person (or society) A, but false for person (or society) B. This cannot mean merely that A *believes* that torture is wrong, and B does not believe it, for all parties can agree that A and B have such beliefs. For the relativist to be saying anything distinctive, his claim must mean something more than this—his claim must be that relative values exist as something over and above moral beliefs. What does it mean to say, though, that torture is right-for-A, and wrong-for-B? It's hard to see how this makes any sense—once you take the universalizability out of a moral command, it ceases to be a moral command. (And it won't do simply to say that A and B might be in relevantly different circumstances, because that's not relativism.)

I suspect that many supposed relativists are simply torn, without realizing it, between moral objectivism and moral anti-realism. They want to promote certain moral values, such as tolerance, but they are alive to the force of the skeptical arguments against objectivism (e.g., "How do we find out about these facts?," "What sort of metaphysical status do they have?," "Doesn't science explain the existence of moral beliefs naturalistically?," etc.) and relativism seems a third way. So far, so good, but the problem that now arises is that when it is plainly stated, relativism seems absurd—how can some actions be right-for-A but wrong-for-B? Never mind, just call that "extreme" relativism: all you have to do now is to present relativism again, but this time in an evasively abstract way, with soothing talk of "horizons" and "practices"—for example, "practices do not prescribe action, rather they announce conditions to be subscribed to in acting"—and call it "mild" or "bounded" relativism. Then assure us all that it doesn't have any extreme or radical consequences (and ignore the fact that the skeptical questions mentioned above present just as much a problem for relative values as for objective values, for relative values are no more accessible to the empirical method than are objective values).

So much for generalities. What sorts of claims do mild relativists make about more particular moral matters? Roggeveen is again representative. He says, for instance, that a moral objectivist is bound to accept that some cultures are superior to others.

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He also claims to be against the view, which, he says, "the cultural superiority thesis suggests," that "one way of organizing a society, is always and irrevocably superior to another."

He contrasts this with the idea that the "'best' way to govern [is] to consider circumstance," that governing is "an intensely practical business," which does not involve "a priori reasoning . . . to solve a particular problem," but rather involves "the application of experience and 'local knowledge,'" and that

> the government will itself be the product of that local knowledge; its customs, traditions and laws having grown out of an intimate association with the people it is intended to serve.

This sort of idea, that objectivists have to (and in fact do) believe that every society should be organized in exactly the same way, no matter what the local conditions, and no matter what the background of the society, and that they must be ruled from above by a priori rules administered by robotic bureaucrats who will ignore relevant details when dealing with any particular case, and who can never weigh up which is the lesser of two evils, is surprisingly widespread. It is also nonsense. It may have been true that some objectivists have believed something like it in the past, although Roggeveen himself points out that Burke, who was as objectivist as any when it came to the administration of India, baulked at such a view. But this position is not entailed by objectivism, and one would have to scour thoroughly the Senior Common Rooms of Oxford and follow the trail of empty sherry bottles to find anyone who still believes it.

But Roggeveen has an even more damning accusation to make against objectivists and "cultural supremacists." This charge would be beneath comment except for the fact that it is taken seriously by so many reasonable people (as well as by many unreasonable ones). The accusation is that the belief that one's society is culturally or morally superior to other societies will lead to war.[1]

Bounded relativism, on the other hand, is apparently the world's savior, for it "allows for the limitation, if not the elimination, of war." Well, praise be to bounded relativism. But how would it manage to achieve such a state of bliss, which the best minds of history have failed to produce? It appears from what Roggeveen writes, although he hardly makes it clear, that he thinks it would have this result because it would lead to countries "confining foreign intervention to cases where state interests are at stake."

Some form of this policy may perhaps be beneficial, although as stated it is so vague that it could be used to justify any action —the Iraqis, for instance, may well have believed that state interests were at stake in their invasion of Kuwait. I shall not discuss here, though, whether or not a policy of this type is a good one; I will only note that there is no reason why a relativist rather than an objectivist should accept it. The United States, for instance, is probably the country that is best known for explicitly adopting this sort of policy (or at least for attempting to abide by it for the most part), but the U.S. is hardly a nation ruled by relativists. The great majority of America's foreign policy makers, and its citizens (*pace* the faculties at Berkeley and Yale), are firmly convinced of the worth of their own culture over most others in the world. If anything, the sense of its own cultural superiority has made the country less warlike, because its citizens think—and not without reason —that all other nations are trying to become more like it.

In fact, it seems to me that a great deal of the foreign military interventions that have taken place in recent years have been at least

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1 In case you think I am exaggerating or caricaturing Roggeveen's views, let me quote him: "states which hold ideas of cultural superiority are *by definition* not likely to compromise with those whom they regard as, at best, cultural inferiors, or, at worst, barbarians. The result is *unlimited war*"(my italics).

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partly due to a certain class of person, many of whom would describe themselves as being some form of relativist. Such people will complain bitterly, and often quite justifiably, about the West's lack of action in stopping atrocities and tyranny and so forth (although only in certain countries; some of the worst countries are ignored because "that's just their way of doing things"). And sometimes these people succeed in goading the U.S. and the UN into action, especially if these characters occupy positions of power and influence. The role that these figures play in such matters is not always recognized, though, and this is partly because once the intervention takes place, and things get serious and deadly, the very same people will almost always do a hypocritical about-face and turn on America, and accuse it of playing at being the world's policeman.

Having said this, I don't deny that many nations have caused terrible wars because of their own sense of superiority and that much persecution has resulted from the belief that one has the objective truth in one's own hands. But then, much good has been done (perhaps the majority of it) as a result of the belief that there are objective standards to which one must stay true, no matter what is happening around one. And anyway, a widespread loss of belief in objective standards is hardly likely, whatever Roggeveen says, to bring about the prevention of war, or even of states reducing the number of times they decide to march into other countries. If we all start agreeing that there isn't really any right or wrong, just right-according-to-such-and-such-practices, and wrong-according-to-such-and-such-practices, then the likely result would be an increase in war, not a decrease. What's to stop a nation from deciding that it's right-by-their-standards to conquer the world, or to annex their neighbors? Why does it follow that a nation of bounded relativists will be tolerant and compassionate and keep themselves to themselves? (The Nazis, after all, were thoroughgoing relativists.) Are we supposed to accept some Rousseau-like position, according to which the natural state of all humans is to be peaceful and loving and that violent actions are only the result of the corrupting influence of objectivism?

The results of a widespread adoption of relativism—even "mild" relativism—might be even worse than widespread moral "skepticism" or "anti-realism" (the view that there are no moral values whatsoever, whether objective or relative). A widespread moral "anti-realism" would probably cause certain people, and perhaps large numbers of them, to do wrong, who otherwise would not. But at least anti-realism doesn't tell would-be murderers, torturers, and thieves that the acts they are contemplating are in any way right, and this would perhaps be enough to put many such people off doing them, for the moral sense, objective or not, isn't likely to be abandoned completely by most people, even if anti-realism did become all the rage ("rage" perhaps being the operative word here). Relativism, however, allows the would-be perpetrator to think that the ghastly deeds that tiptoe up and down his spine are "right-for-him," thus providing the perfect rationalization to assuage the vestiges of his moral sense.

We should be careful not to confuse objectivism with infallibilism, and an objectivist is well advised to be a fallibilist, that is, someone who is well aware that he could be wrong and others right, and who thinks long and hard about whether his actions are justified, rather than just assuming that in every case he is the supreme arbiter of morality. (A relativist moral system, of course, doesn't have the problem that it could possibly go wrong, but only because it takes it that there is nothing to go wrong about, which is hardly conducive to sober reflection and self-doubt.)

Objectivists have too often been infallibilists, which might suggest that objectivism is likely always to lead to infallibilism and dogmatism; the last thirty-five years, though, have probably put paid to the correlation. Besides, relativists are no less dog-

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matic than anyone else when it comes to issues they care about; the only real difference is that they *tell* us they're not dogmatic, and they hide their dogmatism, even—or especially—from themselves. And this is worse, because to do this is to make yourself, in your own mind, immune to criticism, which will serve to make you even more infallibilist. When you have convinced yourself that you're nonjudgmental, you usually start making *more* moral pronouncements (albeit disguised ones), not fewer, as any postmodernist tract—or any flower-power manifesto, for that matter—will confirm.

One of the attractions of relativism for many people (and Roggeveen is no exception) is that it can be (and has been) used to undermine colonialism and racism. But relativism is an indiscriminate killer, for it undermines equally anti-colonialism and anti-racism. And in a society in which relativism is widely believed, the intolerant are likely to thrive at the expense of the tolerant, for they will see in relativism a justification for their behavior, which will serve to increase it. This is not to deny that objectivism could also be seen as an excuse for intolerance—the intolerant are, after all, always on the lookout for an excuse. But the establishment of relativism would, in practice, exaggerate the tolerance of those who are naturally tolerant, making them less able to disagree with others, and thus leaving them quite unable to voice any sort of effective protest against intolerance (and plenty of people will tell you that this sort of thing has happened in the universities).

In summary, then, it is my belief that many intelligent, learned, and reasonable people are attracted to some form of "mild" or limited relativism. These views are very often of a similar sort to the view adumbrated by Roggeveen, and so I have taken his position as an exemplar of mild relativism, to point out the flaws in this way of thinking. (And by concentrating on an actual essay, I avoid the response one often gets when attacking relativism: that one is attacking a straw man.) This mild form of relativism is no different in essence from "extreme relativism": it is simply more evasive and foggy. By fudging the issues, a mild relativist like Roggeveen "makes relativism more bearable." But he thereby makes it more dangerous, because all he has done is to clothe extreme relativism in nebulous language in order to disguise its idiocies, thus making it more attractive to those people, of whom there are always far too many, who like their world-views obscure and deep-sounding. Such views may be relatively harmless when held by decent people—indeed, one of the attractions of these views for such people seems to be their (apparent) inoffensiveness—but they may be a potent weapon for the indecent. And scattering the keys to the sophist's intellectual armory willy-nilly can't be a good idea, even if the keys do come wrapped in nice woolly pink key holders.

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A new poem
by Daniel Mark Epstein

Edna St. Vincent Millay

(1892–1950)

Unquiet spirit, by what right
Do I come to disturb your dust
In this omniscient October light
A half century almost from the day
You tumbled down your library stairs
Into eternal night? By what right
Do I invade the dignity of your house,
Ransack the closets, shelves and drawers,
Measuring your dresses and jewelry,
Picturing you alive, challenging me?

I breathe deep, hoping a sweet scent
Of you, long breathless, might arise,
Some stray atom of your spirit meant
For mine alone. We are not so different
Maybe—man, woman, alive or dead,
Souls confronting the inarticulate.
I come to write your life, a ghoulish trade—
Like others of my time and not like you
Who made a fortune making Fortune rhyme.
To make my living I must turn to prose.
This is what has brought me to your house,
Gardens, letters, grave and diary.
And really, if you didn't want biography,
Why do you preserve all of this stuff,

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Your books, shoes and teacups, lingerie,
A hat made from a peacock, golden coat
Cut from a lion or an ocelot?

The fiery swirl of hair clipped from your head
In childhood to make tresses for a doll;
The doll itself! Sits staring, cracked and bald
Above the bureau where the hair is kept,
The relic of a goddess, wrapped
In tissue, the red hair that drove men mad,
Made them write love letters by the yard,
Pleading, jealous, tormented by need.
You kept them all. Had you no regard
For the dignity of the dead, no modesty?
Did you mean to burn them before you died?
I want to think you left the hoard for me,
Calling me to bring you back to life,
Dangerous, voluptuous, green-eyed:
Better a poet, moonlighting biography,
Than a shrunken scholar, deaf to prosody.

I want to believe it. But who am I
To climb this wooded hill
Along an overgrown, untrodden trail,
To touch the gravestone planted in
The earth that owns your ashes still,
Joined with your husband, your true love,
Here in this mountain laurel grove?
You are not here. And I'm vexed with questions.
The world was yours: beauty, love and fame,
The gift of speech, moments of ecstasy,
Money and men, houses, horses, land.
Why, Edna, were you never satisfied?
Can I write what I cannot understand?

I have yet to check the one-room shack
Where you wrote a libretto and a book
Of verse before your beauty and your art
Gave in to gin, morphine, and despair.
Heart pounding, I loose the rusted lock.
Nothing here but a table and chair,
An iron wood-stove and a wind-up clock
On the windowsill, faded, vague with dust,

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Whose hands were tied one autumn afternoon
Or early morning fifty years ago.
At last! Is this the sign I begged for, some
Sympathetic magic, a poet's trick?
Across the timeless space I hear the rhythm;
The clock, true as a heart, begins to tick.

Now you tell me what you learned too late:
True joy, like genius, is a grace
To nurture, bring to blossom and bear fruit
In its own season. Thundering ecstasy
Always may be bought for the right price
Of wine or the poppy, sex or poetry.
Death to the soul that cannot see
The difference. Lightning blasts the house
Built to be the home for happiness.

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Theater

Trivial selves, big issues

by Mark Steyn

Sometimes opportunity doesn't just knock, it lights up the sky. For Ben Harcourt, it arrives at the climax of oral sex with his mistress. He'll always remember the occasion, not because the fellatio was any better or worse than usual, but because at that precise moment the first plane hit the World Trade Center.

The Mercy Seat, Neil LaBute's new play at the Acorn Theatre, is set on America's morning after: September 12, 2001. When first we meet him, Ben is in business dress, not at the office but sitting on the couch of a well-appointed downtown loft. His cell phone is ringing continuously, but he ignores it. We understand why when Abby returns. She's his boss and mistress and she's gone out for groceries. She's covered in dust. The dust from the twin towers. And we begin to understand why he's not answering his cell.

Ben was supposed to be at a meeting at the World Trade Center that Tuesday morning. Instead, he stopped off at Abby's for a quick one. So now he's officially among the missing and 9/11 is for him "the opportunity." He can stay missing, play dead, be rid of his wife and two daughters, and start a new life with Abby. Whether or not to take "the opportunity" is the question he and his lover attempt to resolve, in real time, over the next hundred minutes.

LaBute's reputation was made by the fascinatingly repulsive film *In the Company of Men* and the fascinatingly repulsive play *Bash*. His repulsiveness has got somewhat less fascinating since those glory days, but he's still regarded as a man without peer when it comes to anatomizing the narcissism and nastiness that lurks deep within the dark heart of the average white guy. Though Ben is the usual LaButian principal boy, rarely has he been summed up so neatly as he is in the physical person of Liev Schreiber. Mr. Schreiber has a taut muscular body topped by a child's face. That's the LaButian anti-hero in a nut's shell: power and immaturity; the man who's always a boy, the boy who's always a brute. Schreiber is a more nuanced actor than either his body suggests or the script calls for. In the small Acorn Theatre, you're aware in that opening scene of his tear-streaked face. There's no mention of tears in the text and, though the gesture presumably met with the approval of LaBute as director, you appreciate that Schreiber is going to greater lengths to humanize the character than most actors do with this author's male creations.

The script, on the other hand, is steadfastly loyal to LaButian convention. "I always take the easy route," says Ben. "Do it faster, simpler, you know, whatever it takes to get done, be liked, get by. That's me. Cheated in school." Like many of his semi-articulate riffs, it would be right at home in the middle of *Bash* or *In the Company of Men*, and the only novelty rests in the fact that he's applying the sentiments to the possibilities opened up by the vast hole in

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the ground just outside Abby's ash-shrouded windows. Every so often, Ben will say something that adroitly binds the crafty opportunism of LaBute men to the ennobling patriotism of September 11: "The American way," he explains to Abby, "is to overcome," the obstacle to overcome in this particular case being the missus and kids in the suburbs.

Abby, played by Sigourney Weaver, is twelve years older than Ben. For years she's been urging him to "make the call," though a faked death and a new identity in another town is a little more complicated than she had in mind. But for Ben this is the less complicated option. "It's a hell of a lot better this way, letting 'em think whatever happened, rather than dragging them through court for a year and fighting over who gets which Barbie, and for how long, and at which designated location! This is better," he concludes, and you believe him—not just because of those studies claiming that children are damaged less by bereavement than by divorce, but also because in such declarations Ben's motivation, in all its deranged selfishness, is palpable: he wants in on the event, just like a lot of people did after September 11th—they couldn't be firemen, so they took cookies to firehouses, or they gave blood in Miami and Seattle. They found their own connection to what happened.

So, one could argue, does Ben: It's just that because he's a self-absorbed clod, his connection to what happened is self-absorbed and cloddish, and so that's his contribution to the big picture. Schreiber's persuasive performance invites you to see him not as an aberration but as one end of the spectrum. He's not like those firemen or the heroes of Flight 93, but, to be honest, neither am I and neither are you, and, once we've acknowledged that, who's to say the fellow who feels sad for a week and buys a "United We Stand" bumper sticker for his car isn't closer to the Ben end of things than the big-burly-fireman-pounding-up-the-stairs end? Abby recoils from her lover's callousness and mentions a woman she saw in the street frantically trying to tape flyers of "missing" loved ones to the lampposts. "So," says Ben, "did you help her?" We know the answer: she was moved by the scene, but she didn't want to be in it.

The trouble with these moments is that they're just that: moments. *The Mercy Seat* lacks almost any kind of forward thrust: it's a play with nothing driving it. Well, so what? You could say the same about half the shows in town. But, when your play is yoked to something as primal and as visceral as September 11, the lethargic chattiness seems entirely the wrong voice. LaBute seems to have reserved his energy for Abby, who spends most of the evening lobbing sour little shafts at her lover: "Ooh, you're so sexy when you're being a prick." "Wow, that makes me feel all tingly inside. And I didn't even have to use the bamboo shoots." One of the qualities I like about Sigourney Weaver's acting is her ability to convey the vulnerability beneath the hardness. There's not a lot of that here, just a terrible plonking portentousness that makes every facetious little zinger land with a dull thud. You're left wondering what on earth the wife must be like for Ben to contemplate a new life as Mr. Abby. That, by the way, is a defect of the production entirely unrelated to the 9/11 peg: there is absolutely zero chemistry between Schreiber and Miss Weaver.

And so they bicker, they bitch, they discuss sex and their age difference. She slices cheese. He pops another beer. And, as the play dissolves into just another tedious glib relationship drama, you begin to wonder if pushing the big picture to the periphery isn't the whole point. Now and then, Ben and Abby go to the prematurely frosted windows and remark on the absence of the towers. But that's it. Otherwise, the tone of the play is broadly that of Elizabeth Wurtzel, celebrated author of *Bitch* and *Prozac Nation*, whose apartment is also at Ground Zero, but who found herself, even as it was happening, fighting vainly the old ennui: "I just felt, like, everyone was over-

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reacting," she told Canada's *Globe and Mail*. "People were going on about it. That part really annoyed me. My main thought was: What a pain in the ass. . . . I had not the slightest emotional reaction. I thought, 'This is a really strange art project.'" Of the collapsing towers, Miss Wurtzel said, "It just slid like a turtleneck going over someone's head. It was just beautiful." (In fairness to her, that image for all its characteristic heartlessness was better than anything John Updike and the other frilly poseurs came up with for the special commemorative metaphor-packed edition of *The New Yorker*.)

LaBute has produced a 9/11 play for the world's Wurtzels. Its message is: But enough about how America changed. Let's talk about me. I haven't changed at all. In a sense, in using the day as a backdrop to a drama of trivial self-absorption, the author is attempting his own redefinition of the event. Even the title, with its solemn evocation of the Ark of the Covenant, is a jest on audience expectations. That seems reasonable enough. America is divided into those who think September 11 is a day that will live in infamy and a call to moral seriousness, and those who think: yeah, it was a bummer, and some people died, but most of us didn't and this whole war thing is a real downer, and if we can't get back to pre-9/11 trivial self-absorption then the terrorists will have won. This is broadly the LaBute line. The mismatch between the broad canvas and the close-up is what appeals to him—not the "internalization of the landscape" that anyone who's done a creative writing correspondence course can slough off, but the willful refusal to internalize the landscape, and instead to answer the soaring rhetoric with a celebration of shallowness.

Well, we shall see which template of 9/11 prevails. LaBute's case would be better made, however, if his generic relationship whinefest weren't such a poor example of the genre. What's happening outside the window may be "based on a true story" but what's inside the apartment is fake in all its essentials: you never believe for a moment that Ben and Abby have been together for three years and the more clunky backstory LaBute throws in—remember that time in Vermont?—the more hollow it seems. Even the cute premise—a man who sees mass death as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity—smells phony by the end. You begin the show reckoning Ben's the pathetic little opportunist, you end the evening thinking it's LaBute. Insofar as the author is exercised by any major issue it's this: after September 11, will there still be a place for my plays?

I've seen more shows in the last few weeks than I normally would. Perhaps that's a mistake, for after a while it's not the rare distinctions you notice, only the overwhelming reliance on the same shared assumptions. I jumbled up my notes for *Class Mothers of '68* (at the Clurman) and *Joe and Betty* (at the Kirk, the Clurman's stablemate) and I can't disentangle them, not because the plays are superficially the same—one's a one-woman show with Priscilla Lopez playing six working moms, the other's basically a two-hander set in a small Catskills town a generation earlier—but because the impulses underlying the characters are indistinguishable and are communicated to us in the same tired shorthand.

In *The Mercy Seat*, LaBute's diminution of September 11 is at least intentional: he set out to take something large and unprecedented and make it just another leaf of the calendar—like this year's Superbowl or Macy's parade. Elsewhere, the reduction of the special to the generic is now almost reflexive. Long-time readers may recall how much I admire the work of Fiona Shaw and her director Deborah Warner. Miss Shaw is known to most of the world as Harry Potter's Aunt Petunia, but that does not exactly test the range of her abilities. Her Electra in London was one of the great RSC productions of the last twenty years, and, when she took up Medea, many of us expected something even more powerful. It was not to be. Now ensconced at the Brooks Atkinson, Miss Shaw's Medea is, taken as a self-contained performance, even more intense than

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it was in London. She combines an imposing physicality—rangy and muscular—with a powerful vocal presence and a cool instinctive intelligence about the weight in every syllable. I like the way she finds the light and shade in Euripides: even as the tragedy overwhelms, there are flashes of flirtiness, a reminder that revenge is what follows when seduction fails. The translation, by Kenneth McLeish and Frederic Raphael, is almost as elegantly spare as Miss Shaw: "My lovely life is lost; I want to die," says Medea in her opening speech and, as matter of fact as it's put, it nevertheless communicates a host of contradictions.

Unfortunately, for me at least, everything is ruined by the first image of Miss Shaw entering in sunglasses, baggy cardigan, floral print dress. Deborah Warner has chosen to set this production in a bleak English or Irish housing development: cinder blocks, a patio, a paddling pool, lots of Fisher Price toys strewn around, including—in a somewhat heavy-handed touch—a toy Red Cross kit. If Miss Warner means that the lurid précis of *Medea* could be torn from today's tabloids, well, she's right. But so what? Yes, if you rummage around, you can find put-upon women in housing projects who kill their kids. A good bunch of the ghastlier pardons Governor Ryan just issued in Illinois sound like rejected Euripides plot lines. Medea, for the love of Jason, has murdered her brother and betrayed her father. Now Jason has taken up with King Creon's daughter. A modern audience may well spot the topical resonances lurking within Medea. But it's unlikely to spot the Corinthian power politics lurking within a Dublin housewife. That's not why Euripides' earliest surviving tragedy survives. In making Medea ordinary, you make her less universal.

But at least *Medea* has Fiona Shaw. Everywhere else around town the same grim process is underway without any such compensations. Everywhere you turn, extraordinary people are being reduced to types—from *Hollywood Arms*, Carol Burnett's downbeat showbiz memory play, to *Imaginary Friends*, Nora Ephron's endearingly awful "play with music" about Mary McCarthy and Lillian Hellman. A textbook example of the problem is *Hank Williams: Lost Highway*, Randal Myler and Mark Harelik's musical biography of the lonesome country balladeer now at the Manhattan Ensemble Theatre after great success in Nashville. Williams' moment was a brief one: a big cascade of country-&-western hits—"Your Cheatin' Heart," "Hey, Good Lookin'," "Jambalaya," "Honky Tonk Angels," "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry"—and then, almost as soon as it began, it was over; on New Year's Eve half a century ago, he drank too much whiskey and died in the back of his car. He was twenty-nine and looked fifty-nine, and he was on his way to a solo gig because his band had had enough and quit. Twenty-five thousand fans showed up at the funeral.

All this sounds potentially interesting, but the "musical biography" is perhaps the most uninquisitive form in the theater. There are two kinds of stars who attract them—the ones who die in plane crashes (Glenn Miller, Buddy Holly, Patsy Cline) and the ones who burn out because they can't cope with the price of fame (Hank Williams, Billie Holiday, Judy Garland). But in the end it makes little difference whether the featured attraction falls into category A or B. One has a plane crash at the end, the other an overdose, but for the first couple of hours they chug along almost identically: The star's music will be initially "misunderstood" but there will be a moment when he insists, "I gotta play my music my way!" There will be a domineering figure and also a love interest who forces him to choose between personal happiness and professional success. And by the time all the conventions have been honored, the only difference between a musical biography of Judy Garland and Kurt Cobain is that Kurt's doesn't have "Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas."

Lost Highway is, as they say, typical of the genre. We learn that Hank was born in rural

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Alabama, dropped out of school, and took up music about the same time he took up the moonshine, around ten years old. Much of this information isn't revealed but simply announced, by band members addressing the audience directly. The announcement leads into a short scene and then a song and then another announcement and then—why, look, here comes Mama Lilly a-thumpin' her Bible! And then another song, and another announcement, and then some soap operatics with his wife Audrey. The acting is mostly undistinguished, and through it all lonesome Hank remains a blank. Maybe he was as dull as this, just as maybe Buddy Holly was as dull as he was in the long-running West End hit *Buddy*. But when every legendary, revolutionary voice of a generation comes out a dullard, maybe it's the inherent limitations of the form.

Fortunately, there are the songs, and this show does them great credit, thanks to an astonishing performance by Jason Petty. Such minimal acting as is required he isn't really up to, but he looks like Williams and, more importantly, he sounds eerily like him in all the most important numbers, bringing alive all the great twangy heartache of the era: as a continually interrupted concert, it's a memorable evening. But it's not drama. Most pure pop songs are hard to use theatrically, but the Williams catalogue is so particular you know that a more ambitious dramatist than Mr. Myler would have wrung a lot more dramatic juice out of them. Peter Bogdanovich used Hank's songbook brilliantly in his film of *The Last Picture Show*.

Finally, in the midst of this epidemic of oversized personalities being shrunk to smaller-than-life, let us note an advanced strain of the disease: in *Tommy Tune: White Tie and Tails*, at the new and very drab Little Shubert Theatre, Tommy Tune does to himself what Hank and Buddy had to have done to them posthumously. Mr. Tune has surrounded himself with the best available talent: vocal support (and more) from the Manhattan Rhythm Kings, a sixteen-piece band, arrangements by Wally Harper, the last orchestrations in a long and illustrious career by the late Peter Matz, four other orchestrators bringing up the rear, and a canny selection of songs, including an oddly affecting "Shanghai Lil," a Harry Warren/Al Dubin number that fell into the camp category decades ago and deserves to be rescued.

In other words, this show has everything. Everything, that is, except Tommy Tune. Although it's named for him and although the taller-than-life Mr. Tune towers over the proceedings literally, he's all but invisible as a living presence. His curse is that the other song-and-dance men are all gone, and so, even in his own show, he stands not for himself but for an entire tradition of which he's the last extant example. Tune is always professional and attentive to detail—you can tell by the collaborators he's chosen—but in this outing he's also a little anonymous. To paraphrase Norma Desmond, he's still tall, it's the shows that got small.

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Art

Richness, quietness, pleasure

by Karen Wilkin

Finding the modern French paintings at the Hermitage is not easy—and that's without taking into account the time and effort it takes to get to St. Petersburg. Once you get past the clogged entrance and the hostile babushka selling tickets, you have to follow a sporadic trail of easy-to-miss signs, negotiate a series of elaborately decorated state rooms and corridors, refuse to be waylaid by astonishing amounts of malachite, lapis lazuli, and colored marble, thread your way around clusters of multilingual visitors, locate a hard-to-find dingy back stair, and climb to the third floor to what must be the most unprepossessing but mercifully uncrowded exhibition spaces in the entire complex. The reward for perseverance, of course, is the stunning group of Matisses, Picassos, Gauguins, Cézannes, and other modern masters, drawn from the collections assembled by the Moscow textile merchants Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov in a few short years at the beginning of the twentieth century. But if you want to see Morozov's spectacular gathering of works by Bonnard and his colleagues, you have to retrace your steps, leave the main buildings, cross Palace Square to the curved wing, pierced by a much-photographed skewed archway, that once housed the offices of Imperial bureaucrats, and brave another set of resident dragons behind the ticket counter to enter a set of well-lit, newly renovated galleries.

It is all, as the Michelin guides say, worth the detour. Even today, for anyone who cares passionately about painting, a visit to the Hermitage is the equivalent of a religious pilgrimage—the museum's collection of Rubens oil sketches alone is almost reason enough to make the trip, not to mention the Rembrandts—which makes the trek to the third floor modernist galleries comparable to walking the last fifty yards towards the shrine on your knees. When I was a graduate student and for some years afterwards, any American who had actually seen *those Matisses* in the flesh was regarded with the kind of awe that must have been accorded to someone who'd been to Jerusalem in the Middle Ages. Like their medieval counterparts, such privileged, intrepid visitors brought back relics in the twentieth century. I'm eternally indebted to a colleague who managed to take slides of the Hermitage Matisses and gave me a set of duplicates that I've used ever since.

It wasn't until the early 1970s, as far as I know, that modernist paintings from the USSR began to be exhibited in the United States. I remember the excitement that greeted one of the first of these touring shows to come to New York, almost thirty years ago, and the seemingly endless wait to enter Knoedler Gallery. But what is more vivid is the recollection of my first direct encounter with a pair of modernism's most powerful, iconic images of women: Matisse's 1913 portrait of his wife—stylish little hat, blue-green blouse, and rust col-

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ored stole—and Picasso's fierce 1908 *Woman with a Fan*—white shift, bare breast, implacable forehead, and lowered eyes—both from the Hermitage.

Over the last two decades, the excitement attendant on such exhibitions has not diminished, but with the gradual erosion of political barriers, there has been an exponential increase in opportunities for American audiences to see the legendary European modernist from the Hermitage and the Pushkin without crossing the Atlantic. The mid-1980s saw a dazzling selection at the Metropolitan that included such masterworks as Matisse's *Harmony in Red* (1908–09), with its sinuous arabesques uniting the table top and wallpaper of a dining room with a flowering tree seen through a window, and *The Conversation* (1909), with its confrontational figures, one seated, one standing, tensely poised in an expanse of radiant blue; the show included, too, Picasso's early Cubist knot of female nudes, apparently carved out of red stone, *Three Women* (1908), like the Matisses, from the Hermitage.

Some years later, an illuminating show, also at the Met, examined Russian taste in French art, through a selection that spanned works acquired by Catherine the Great, on the advice of Diderot, to modernist pictures bought by those amazingly adventurous textile tycoons, apparently on no one's advice but their own. And, of course, neither of the great Matisse exhibitions of the 1990s, *Matisse in Morocco* or the retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, could have been organized without numerous loans from the former collections of the painter's Russian patrons, now divided between the Pushkin and the Hermitage.

In the wake of the dissolution of the USSR, such cooperation has increased, for various reasons, and exhibits of both old master and modernist art from Russian museums are no longer rare occurrences. (No, I am not going to discuss the relationship of the Hermitage and the Guggenheim in Las Vegas.) One of the most recent manifestations was the exhibition "Voyage into Myth: French Paintings from Gauguin to Matisse from the Hermitage Museum," a representative selection of Shchukin's and Morozov's treasures, seen at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, while a similar selection from Moscow's Pushkin Museum is traveling in the United States.[1]

Let's get to the uncomfortable stuff about motivation and the implications of sending large chunks of important museum collections halfway around the world to function as what an art historian friend used to call "traveling salesmen for culture." Museum visitors plainly benefit from the opportunity to see far-flung, deservedly celebrated works; even if they are required to pay hefty prices for timed admission tickets, it's cheaper than going to St. Petersburg and you don't need a visa. When the USSR still existed, a good deal of rhetoric about fostering mutual understanding accompanied exhibitions of works from the Hermitage and the Pushkin. Given the enthusiasm and delight with which the shows were greeted, it may even have been true. (Yes, I know there were other motives; Occidental Petroleum played a key role in at least the earlier versions of these projects.) Nowadays, the sometimes shaky image of the new Russia is undoubtedly bolstered by the display of its riches abroad.

Of course, the realities of the museum world being what they are, extraordinary works of art are not sent on world-wide tours out of altruism, hopes for peace, a desire to suggest stability, or even pure aes-

1 "Voyage into Myth: French Paintings from Gauguin to Matisse from the Hermitage Museum" opened at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Quebec, on January 31 and remains on view until April 27, 2003. The exhibition was previously on view at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario from October 12, 2002 to January 5, 2003. A catalog of the exhibition has been published by the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in partnership with Éditions Hazan, Paris (224 pages, $39.95 [Canadian]).

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thetic idealism. French modernist pictures are box-office attractions, and French modernist pictures from Russian museums, even though many of them have figured importantly in a major retrospective and thematic exhibits in the past two decades, are particularly sexy. The AGO and the Montreal MFA gain prestige for having connections with the Russian museum, while the combination of the words "Gauguin," "Matisse," and "Hermitage" in the current show's title is virtually guaranteed to enhance the finances of both Canadian institutions.

Since museums pay handsomely for the privilege of borrowing such distinguished and desirable works, the Hermitage benefits, too. All of this is very welcome, for everyone concerned. The Art Gallery of Ontario is especially hungry for prestige and funds just now because it is about to embark on an ambitious renovation and expansion program. The Hermitage urgently needs money for security, climate control, the repair and refurbishing of galleries, and other basics, such as curatorial salaries, which are deplorably low in the present new economy. (On a rainy day last spring, an art historian colleague, my architect husband, and I stood, with a—woefully underpaid—senior curator from the Hermitage, in front of a late Rembrandt masterpiece, discussing iconography, paint handling, and the results of a recent cleaning, occasionally pushing back the damp curtain that blew in from the open window beside the picture.)

Sometimes more than cold cash is involved in these museum exchanges. Works are sometimes lent only if the borrowing organization does needed conservation work on a picture. And the Hermitage has another incentive for allowing its modernist masterworks to go on the road: there are plans to move the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European collections from their present nondescript setting to better appointed galleries in the renovated Imperial offices on the far side of Palace Square. I don't discount for a moment the aesthetic ambitions of the museums participating in the tour, but shows like *Voyage into Myth* simply don't happen without compelling financial reasons.

These are all givens. What is more important and more interesting is to ask "what was the show like?" *Voyage into Myth* was wonderful, illuminating, perplexing. The installation at the AGO, like the exhibition catalogue, made much of the idea of the terrestrial paradise, as embodied by the Midi, as a dominant obsession of the artists represented. Baudelaire's celebrated lines from "L'Invitation au voyage," "Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté/ Luxe, calme, et volupté," were invoked, in the Richard Wilbur translation: "There, there is nothing but grace and measure/ Richness, quietness, and pleasure." Yet the idea, while attractive, seems to have been attached after the fact, as a curatorial conceit devised to impose some kind of rationale on what could be described as a slightly random selection of some terrific and not so terrific paintings from the Hermitage and a few sculptures. (In addition to an ample group of stellar pictures by Gauguin, Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, and Bonnard, there were also a fair number of works by less notable and often much less interesting artists; many of these, it must be admitted, were extremely good paintings, but there were quite a few others whose inclusion seemed less than essential.)

Not that the theme is wholly arbitrary. It isn't unreasonable to think about the potent image of *l'Age d'Or*, the idyllic world of nymphs and shepherds who spent their time dancing, making music and love, picking flowers, and watching the odd sheep, when you are confronted by the exhibition's Gauguins or Matisses, or even its soapy marble Rodins. It's plausible, too, to consider the dream of Arcadia and what the curators call "the myth of the South," in the presence of the show's light-struck Bonnards, its Cézanne landscapes, or its angular Picasso dryad—although you should consider, too, the attraction of the extreme cheapness of life in Mediterranean fishing towns or even in Polynesia, once you got

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there. Of course, the really provocative question is why these traditional themes, these time-honored academic touchstones of achievement such as the large-scale nude figure in the landscape, had such resonance for these formally progressive, even transgressive, artists.

Sometimes the curators' thesis was illuminating. It's clear that the search for a literal terrestrial paradise, as well as a longing for the "primitive" and the authentic, informs all of the lush Tahitian Gauguins in the exhibition, with their sturdy brown figures and exotic landscapes. It can also be argued convincingly that *l'Age d'Or* was Matisse's life-long subject—think about the Barnes Collection's *Bonheur de vivre*, (1905–06), which presents pastoral images of dancers, musicians, and reclining and crouching nudes that persist throughout his oeuvre, from first to last. The selections in *Voyage into Myth* supported the idea, since they ranged from a radiant view of the Mediterranean fishing village of Collioure, where Matisse painted his first Fauvist images, to a still life whose background includes the study for *The Dance* (now in the Museum of Modern Art), one of the large decorative panels commissioned by Shchukin for the staircase of his Moscow mansion; these powerful pictures could be read as invoking both an ideal vision of the South and the concept of Arcadia, although these notions seem of less significance to the evolution of modernist painting than their luminous color and inventive structure.

In Toronto, attaching ideas about the South to Matisse's marvelous green-washed, half-length figure of a Riffian bandit, painted on one of his 1912–1913 Moroccan sojourns, was a bit of a stretch, but it seemed fairly reasonable, compared to the downright preposterousness of the theme in relation to the exhibition's stern, economically modeled 1908 still lifes by Picasso or his geometric, Cézannian landscapes of 1908 and 1909, with their sharp-edged house and a factory building, complete with a thrusting cylindrical chimney. It's easy to understand why the curators wanted to include these tough, exciting pictures in the show, but there's nothing Arcadian about those sculptural, weighty pears or that fierce monument to modernity and industry.

The real pleasure of the show, obviously, was not the curatorial subtext, but the opportunity to spend time with some marvelous pictures, some, like the Matisses and Picassos, familiar, and, some, like the Gauguins, less frequently seen or reproduced. And there were some real surprises, such as a small, delicious Redon, *Woman Lying under a Tree* (1900–01), a firmly constructed little jewel of broad expanses of red and blue that recalled the intensity and simplicity of Romanesque stained glass panels. Since the labels noted whether a work had come from Shchukin's or Morozov's collection, it was also possible to formulate some ideas about the taste of each of these mysterious figures. According to the evidence in *Voyage into Myth*, Shchukin generally seemed more adventurous, with an appetite for the difficult, uningratiating picture.

Morozov, who was almost twenty years younger, interestingly enough, was equally committed to modernism, but appeared to have preferred more lyrical works. A fascinating article in the show's handsome catalogue by Albert Kostenevich, the Hermitage's internationally acclaimed senior curator of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, brings these two enigmatic men alive, meticulously assembling details that make clear the pivotal role of their patronage in the development of modernist painting, especially through their support of Matisse and Picasso at crucial moments in their careers, early on, when they had few sympathetic viewers and little money. (The article reproduces the well-known photographs of Shchukin's and Morozov's extravagant Moscow homes, a schizophrenic mix of eighteenth-century *fauteuils*, ornate tables, and damask-covered walls lined with radical new paintings, hung edge to edge.)

The culmination of the show, and perhaps the ultimate explanation of the theme,

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is the inclusion of two sets of extravagant decorative panels from Morozov's palatial Moscow home, a selection that literally ranges from the sublime to the ridiculous. The ravishing 1911 Bonnard triptych, *Mediterranean*, once installed on a vast staircase landing, was the star of the recent examination of the decorative schemes of the Nabis, *Beyond the Easel*, seen in Chicago and at the Metropolitan. A golden sun-drenched vision of women and children on a shade-dappled terrace high above red tile roofs and a distant sea, the picture radiates not only "luxe, calme et volupté," but also the very temperature, sounds, and scents of the Midi—the perfect antidote to a dark Russian winter and a superb painting, as well, with its subtle play of creamy mauves, roses, and ochres, and its daring flirtation with symmetry and emptiness.

Morozov was a great admirer of Bonnard and collected his work in some depth, for which he is to be applauded. (The exhibition includes one other of his acquisitions.) His enthusiasm for the rather pedestrian Maurice Denis, whom he also collected in depth, is more difficult to understand, at best, and becomes nearly impossible in the presence of the panels Denis executed for Morozov's music room in 1909. They tell the story of Psyche in a series of classicizing visions in marzipan hues. The nude and draped figures are said to be portraits of Denis's artist friends; the arcades, columns, garlands, and cypress trees of the settings are generic.

Art lovers will recall that Raphael and his assistants addressed the same theme on the walls of the loggia of the Farnesina, in Rome; the politest thing to say about the Denis version is that he was no Raphael. Still, the series had direct benefits. According to the catalogue's informative essay by Kostenevich on the Denis and Bonnard decorative panels in Morozov's collection, the Psyche suite was so admired by the collector's friends (who were not overly enthusiastic about his modernist predilections) that he decided to commission Bonnard to do a piece for the staircase. Given the sheer seductiveness of the result, you have to be grateful to Denis for that. The jury is still out as to whether or not the Psyche panels are otherwise some of the silliest paintings ever painted, but if you can get to Montreal before the end of April, you can decide for yourself. After that, you have to go to Saint Petersburg and the galleries on the far side of Palace Square.

Exhibition notes

"Lois Orswell, David Smith, and Modern Art"
at the Fogg Art Museum,
Cambridge, Massachusetts.
September 21, 2002–February 16, 2003

Whatever you do this month, get yourself to Cambridge, Massachusetts. There you will find a perfect exhibition from a heretofore anonymous art collector named Lois Orswell (1904–1998). In life unknown to nearly everyone in the art world, Orswell assembled one of the most sensitive private collections of modern art. At her house in rural Connecticut, she carried on an intense friendship of correspondence and mutual support with David Smith, and quietly donated her collection to Harvard's Fogg Art Museum, without fanfare, into the hands of curators like Marjorie B. Cohn, who now presides over the current exhibition of her bequest.

In mounting a show of this kind—an exhibition of a collection—a curator must confront not only the provenance of the art but to varying degrees the provenance of the collector. More often than not, the collector fades to the background, mentioned in the exhibition titles but little elsewhere. The splendid "Thaw Collection: Master Drawings and Oil Sketches, Acquisitions Since 1994," on view at the Morgan Library in New York last fall, is one case in point: here the intelligence of the collection spoke silently of the intelligence of the collector.

In "Lois Orswell, David Smith, and Modern Art," however, Marjorie Cohn has

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placed Orswell center stage. Her collection extends from Arshile Gorky, Auguste Rodin, Max Beckmann (his *Actors* [1941–1942] is remarkable), Jacques Lipchitz, Eduardo Paolozzi, and others in her early years of aquisition to important items of African, Asiatic, and ancient art later on, to one of the more important collections of Gaston Lachaise in the United States, to the most personal collection of David Smith anywhere (*Terpsichore and Euterpe* [1947]; *Fish* [1950–1951]; *Detroit Queen* [1957]; *Doorway on Wheels* [1960]; numerous paintings, photographs, and studies). Assembled from the 1940s to the 1960s, her inventory grew to over 340 items, all donated to the Fogg, with 140 works now on display.

Yet it is the provenance of Orswell herself that equally attracts. Marjorie Cohn, who developed a friendship with Orswell late in Orswell's life, has infused the show with the personality of this spirited, tenacious individual. (The show's working title was, I note, "Passionate and Obstinate.")

This show has everything going for it. The exhibition catalogue includes a long essay by Cohn that in its inquiry into the soul of a collector approaches high literature. The editor Sarah B. Kianovsky also includes the complete correspondence between Orswell and Smith, sixty-six letters now in the Fogg archives. Example:

> Dear LO—
> On the bronze—if you want it outside—I'm lacquering the new wooden base about 20 times. Now—if it was on a base in the garden how high should it be—I guess about 24-30 inches—will proportion its height in relationship to sculpture—what do you think—where should it go—relationship bushes etc—
> Regards David S

And Orswell's response:

> Thanks. Not quite sure—it should be low—but if in among plants—a little higher than on terrace—I had thought of those incinerator blocks. Hope *you* have ideas.
> Excited—L.O.

If Orswell's isolation from the art world in the 1960s was notable, her distance from the theory-crazed establishment of the 1970s only became more marked. This, from a letter to Marjorie Cohn:

> I suppose you know that the renowned Rosalind Krauss has been made Columbia's Prof. of ART HISTORY. WHOOOFFF. We might see if the Disney company could run your department.

Orswell's gift to the Fogg was almost sidelined, in fact, by what Cohn calls her "lifelong venomous memory of a visit in about 1966 from Rosalind Krauss, at that time a student [at Harvard]. [T]he Museum was lucky not to have lost them." "Do they want us ALL to look and sound like Roaslind K?" wrote Orswell to Cohn. "I wonder if any one predicted that feminism would join up with that nonsense. But then I never like the ones like Steinem anyway." (Orswell was, among other things, a subscriber to *The New Criterion*. According to Cohn, she often "passed along copies to me, with underlining and marginal exclamation points.")

The art collection of Lois Orswell is united by a shared spirit of life, discovery, and humor (just note the buxom Lachaises). Orswell often called her collection "her children." At the Fogg, we may consider ourselves fortunate that Orswell's family will continue to live under one roof.

—*James Panero*

"Wolfgang Tillmans: Still Life" at the Busch-Reisinger Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts. October 25, 2002–February 23, 2003

Wolfgang Tillmans (b. 1968) proves that for every ying there is a yang. Remember Tillmans? The year 2000 was that halcyon year in which this artist won the Tate's Turner Prize, Britain's postmodern spectacle of diminished expectations. The prize judges at the time praised the German-

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born, London-based photographer for his depictions of "constraint-free lifestyles of youth cultures and alternative concepts of beauty, sexuality, and politics," as well as his "ability to present sensitive subject matter, such as gay sex and a man urinating on a chair, in ways that challenge conventional definitions of art."

To his supporters, Tillmans combined the progressivism of Cool Britannia with the benighted folksiness of the jet-set. Here was a new chronicler of a new modern life. Tillmans's most successful series of photographs concerned the Concorde—the jet of the jet-set, the icon of intercontinental good living, packaged into a snapshot-like flip-book of Concorde taking off, Concorde above a barn, Concorde in the clouds, Concorde far away, Concorde up close, Concorde in the morning, Concorde at night. Tillmans mixed in a few potted sentences about socioeconomic juxtapositions and space-age dreams. Sometime after the prize was announced, a friend bought me this book in Germany. He said it made him laugh. It made me laugh too.

Before Tillmans began dabbling in not-so-serious art in the early 1990s, he lived as a successful fashion photographer working for publications like the British lifestyle magazine *i-D*. Turn this logo ninety degrees clockwise and you may notice a typographical wink. Get it? True to this design, the success of Tillmans's genre of contemporary art, more like a sociological phenomenon, rested in contradictory sensibilities: to scandalize and to secure profit, to work hard in appearing feckless, to butter-up formal concerns with a feel-good sentimentality. We have seen this for a generation.

Yet in his mumbo-jumbo pretensions and high-gloss shine, Tillmans for me came to represent the worst kind of safe artist. In the exhibition catalogue, Nathan Kerman calls Tillmans's compositions "a metaphoric social utopia." It speaks to the downtrodden state of the human spirit, in our conceptions of Thomas More's famous island, that we now aim so low. Just down the hall from the Fogg's sublime David Smith exhibition, Tillmans's series at Busch-Reisinger depicts household leftovers and dirty tupperware (*Kitchen Still Life*, 1995), an image of the gamine model Kate Moss (*Kate McQueen*, 1996), a cross-dresser named Christian (*Christian, Hamburg*, 1991), some crusty gym shorts (*Turnhose [Sandalen]*, 1992), a frequent-flyer exposing his genitalia beneath a seat-back tray (*AA Breakfast*, 1995), and a piece called *Sportflecken* (1996)—a closeup of a stained white T-shirt. A Harvard graduate student named Benjamin Paul, who curated this show with the Fogg's Linda Norden, writes in the catalogue, "in the ivory stains that fleck the monumental white T-Shirt of *Sportflecken*, we see the traces of what may be the outcome of . . . delirious undressing."

If an exhibition of this kind is to succeed, curators should approach it with skepticism. The Harvard curators rightly spilled some wind from Tillmans's sails by departing from the artist's usual dorm-room paste-up style of gallery presentation—the prints are now mounted in evenly spaced museum frames. Yet I couldn't quite determine whether this rehanging was meant to tap Tillmans with academic honors (beauty in the banal) or to cast in doubt the aesthetic criteria of his project. My guess is that it was the former—but it feels more like the latter.

Benjamin Paul's catalogue essay went further in confirming these suspicions. You might question the need for the world's premier graduate school to train students in contemporary art history (a bit of an oxymoron, yes?). Without a critical archive from which to draw, the depth of inquiry into contemporary art is invariably shallow. Writing on Tillmans, Paul praises his images of "individuality as a meaningful way to achieve emancipation from the commodity culture of advanced capitalism." We learn that "Still Life," by way of a Mellon grant and a Theodore Rousseau Graduate Student internship, grew out of a research paper Paul wrote for a seminar on "Queer Theory" that compared Tillmans to (who else?) Nan Goldin, the Old Master of glossy alternative-lifestyle photography.

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In June 1986, Jed Perl asked in these pages, "why is there this haste to transform the contemporary into the historical?"—something museums and academic institutions do by their very nature. Critics of the academy cite its removal from contemporary life as a cause for alarm, which is often true. Yet there are times when the model of the ivory tower works best, as in confronting a contemporary-art figure like Wolfgang Tillmans.

—*James Panero*

"The Park Avenue Cubists: Gallatin, Morris, Frelinghuysen, and Shaw" at the Grey Art Gallery, New York. January 14–March 29, 2003.

Clement Greenberg was undoubtedly a great critic. But he also undoubtedly had his crotchets and blind spots. One crotchet he inherited from Marxism. He tended to see artistic developments in terms of a necessary historical evolution (the ineluctable unfolding of the dialectic, comrade). In "The Decline of Cubism," a famous essay first published in *Partisan Review* in 1948, Greenberg extolled Cubism ("the only vital style of our time") as an "experiment" that advanced the "hope, coincident with that of Marxism and the whole matured tradition of Enlightenment, of humanizing the world." Greenberg's use of "experiment" was not an accident. Cubism, he wrote, "expressed the positivist or empirical state of mind" with its "faith in the supreme reality of concrete experience" and "an all-pervasive conviction that the world would go on improving."

The great irony of Hegelian-Marxist thought—the thing that keeps its adherents in such limber intellectual trim—is the never-ending task of explaining why the inevitable has failed to happen. Cubism was necessary, nevertheless it was in "decline." "Conservative" artists were part of the problem: they lacked "nerve," had turned their back on the "real insights of the age," etc.

Now, it's tough work, fabricating excuses for an unreliable necessity. But Marxists can be clever people. Only a few of them, however, have managed to leaven their cleverness with a highly refined aesthetic sense. Greenberg did it. And the tension between his political commitments and his nose for aesthetic quality was one source of his vitality and richness as a critic—a vitality and a richness, it must be said, that often operated by exclusion.

Greenberg was seldom less than illuminating. It was part of his greatness as a critic that he was also often infuriating. One person who was articulately infuriated by Greenberg's writings about "the decline of Cubism" and related issues was the rich, socially prominent American painter and critic George L. K. Morris (1907–1975). "One must stretch a point to call it criticism at all," Morris wrote about "The Decline of Cubism," "rather it is an appraisal-sheet built around a thesis." (Morris, incidentally, had preceded Greenberg as chief art critic for *Partisan Review* and, in 1937, had quietly provided the financial wherewithal that allowed the magazine to break away from its Stalinist roots.)

Morris was unhappy about Greenberg's diagnosis partly because it depreciated the achievement of Cubist-inspired artists like . . . well, like himself and his wife and friends: Estelle ("Suzy") Freylinghuysen (1911–1988), A. E. Gallatin (1881–1952), and Charles G. Shaw (1892–1974). But Morris's displeasure was not merely personal. He believed, and not without good reasons, that Greenberg's contention that in times of crisis "radical" artists retreat to safer, more conventional aesthetic practices exaggerated "the connection between nerve and great painting." "Surely," Morris wrote, "it is on quality that artists get judged in the end, and not on their innovations."

I think Morris was right about that, and there is some irony in the fact that his pronouncement—the first half of it, anyway—has a distinctly Greenbergian ring to it. "Quality," after all, was a prime enabling epithet for Greenberg and his circle. It was part of Greenberg's Marxism and commitment to the idea of the avant-garde to link quality and innovation; it was part of his

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common sense to attenuate that link as he matured. Greenberg, like many other observers at the time, regarded Morris and the artists congregated around the American Abstract Artists (the AAA) as derivative lightweights. ("Bravura technical performances and nothing more," wrote Robert Goldwater in 1947.) By the 1960s, however, Greenberg shelved the issue of originality and revised his overall judgment. The quality of American abstraction in the 1930s and 1940s, he acknowledged in "America Takes the Lead" (1965), "looks higher now than it did then."

That was a significant admission for a critic as apodictically inclined as Greenberg. But it had little effect on the public reception of the work in question. The damage had been done. One of the great virtues of this exhibition of fifty-odd works by "The Park Avenue Cubists" is to redress the balance a bit. The nickname was bestowed by other members of the AAA on Morris and his socially distinguished friends. Gallatin was the great-grandson of Albert Gallatin, Secretary of the Treasury under Jefferson and Madison and a founder of New York University; Frelinghuysen was the granddaughter of another Secretary of State; Shaw was the heir to part of the Woolworth fortune; and Morris was a descendant of General Lewis Morris, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. The social and financial advantage the friends enjoyed was a source of admiration, envy, and resentment, especially during the bleak years of the Depression and in an art world firmly in the grip of Bohemian nostalgia.

As this exhibition shows, the Park Avenue Cubists were a supremely cultivated and urbane group, well-educated, widely travelled, sophisticated, and patrician in their tastes. Gallatin was an avid collector who owned important works by Picasso, Léger, Gris, and Braque. He established the Gallery of Living Art (later the Museum of Living Art) at NYU in 1927 in the space now occupied by the Grey Gallery. Morris was the first curator. Morris, Shaw, and Gallatin all wrote fetching and occasionally important criticism. (Shaw was also a poet, novelist, and journalist who wrote for Mencken's *Smart Set*, *The New Yorker*, and *Vanity Fair*.) Gallatin and Morris co-founded and wrote for *Plastique*, a short-lived arts journal. Frelinghusyen, although remembered today primarily for her paintings and collages, was first of all an opera singer. She had a brief but apparently distinguished career with the New York City Opera: Virgil Thomson proclaimed her voice one of the "most outstanding for sheer vocal beauty."

The work on view in this exhibition is of a piece with the lives of artists who created it: cultivated, adroit, tasteful, witty, urbane. It is vintage champagne enjoyed in crystal flutes by a small group of friends during a splendid dinner and conversation. Could it be deeper? Perhaps. Could it be more enjoyable? Not likely. This is technically accomplished American Cubism at its most effervescent. Some of it looks a bit dated—Shaw's depiction of a package of Wrigley's gum against an abstract cityscape, for example—but the inherent wit and visual insouciance remain intact. The high points of the exhibition are some of Morris's compositions—especially *New England Church* (1935–6)—and Frelinghuysen's splendidly deft works—*Still Life* (1944), *Composition* (1943), and (my favorite) *Man in Café* (1944).

In 1975, the year of his death, Morris observed that "The hour is overdue for a refinement of sensibility in our vulgar modern world; perhaps against the pressures of contemporary life, the artist can again concentrate on the creation of the beautiful object, which, after all, has been through the centuries an ultimate aim of aesthetic effort." Another quarter century on, his words are as resonant as ever. This exhibition provides one illustration of what Morris had in mind. After closing in New York, it may be seen at the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, and the Samuel P. Harn Museum at the University of Florida, Gainesville.

—*Roger Kimball*

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Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Handel's *Messiah* is not just for Christmas—it's for Easter too (just kidding). *Messiah*, of course, is a masterpiece for all seasons, and for all persons, really. In fact, I would go so far as to say that this greatly familiar and loved work is underrated. Few truly appreciate how good it is. Handel thought it a bolt from the blue (to put it in secular terms), and it's hard to argue with him. *Messiah* is hackneyed, you might complain. But I always say—about all such pieces—"It's not *its* fault that it's hackneyed." There is no cause to penalize a piece for the attachment of others to it, and the determination of the world's musicians, high and low, to play it.

The New York Philharmonic duly provided Handel's oratorio at Christmas. The performances took place, not in Avery Fisher Hall, but at the Riverside Church, where William Sloan Coffin used to celebrate the Viet Cong and other Christly causes. Certainly the Philharmonic offered an attractive *Messiah* lineup. Leading the performances was Sir Neville Marriner, than whom it is hard to do better in this kind of thing (although the orchestra's principal guest conductor, Sir Colin Davis, is also a superb *Messiah* man). The soloists included David Daniels, the countertenor—how often do you hear one of those in this work?—and Elizabeth Futral, the soprano.

But the soloist I was most looking forward to hearing was Richard Croft, the tenor, making his New York Philharmonic debut. His last name may be familiar to you: Richard is brother to Dwayne Croft, the baritone frequently heard at the Metropolitan Opera. Richard first came to my attention in a Washington, D.C., production of Handel's opera *Semele*. He gave the creamiest, silkiest, smoothest "Where'er you walk" I had ever heard—or have heard since.

It is the tenor, of course, who has the first big aria in *Messiah*, and the first aria at all. It is "Comfort ye" (followed by the quicker "Ev'ry valley shall be exalted"). Croft's first phrase was—there is no other way to describe it—comforting. As he continued, he was just as I had remembered him: sensitive, accurate, and smooth almost beyond belief. He employed rather more rubato (or rhythmic and interpretive license) than I would have liked in this aria, but he gave a Class A rendition. And that, unfortunately, was the highlight of the night—unfortunately, because the oratorio had barely begun.

I am reminded of a story a friend and fellow music critic likes to tell: When he was about five years old, his uncle took him to a performance of *The Flying Dutchman*, at the old Met. After the overture—which would be so impressive to a child, and others—he turned to the boy and said, "It's all downhill from here."

Sir Neville was not as his most inspired. You could have been forgiven for thinking

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that he was punching a clock, or collecting a paycheck. Not only could he have done better, his forces—which included the Westminster Symphonic Choir, the New York Philharmonic's regular partner—could also have been more responsive to him. There was little joy or feeling in such choruses as "O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion" and "For unto us a child is born." And technically, the performance, overall, was no prize either. "And he shall purify" was out of sync, and "All we like sheep" was so much choral mush.

It would be wrong to demand that all of these performers—conductor, soloists, orchestra members, chorus members—believe what they are singing (or playing). But they could at least summon up a little musical life.

On the night I attended, David Daniels had called in sick, so the contralto, Anna Larsson, took the bits that had been assigned to him. Sadly, her sound was fuzzy, muffled, and diffuse. Often she could not be heard clearly, especially on her lower notes. Sometimes she sang as though being smothered by a pillow. We can perhaps shift some of the blame to the hall, or rather, church. But neither did Larsson give her arias much character or lift.

The soprano and the bass were better, the former being Elizabeth Futral—whom I have described as a heroic coloratura—and the latter being Nathan Berg. Futral is clean, authoritative, and smart, and her "Rejoice greatly" had some Handelian flair. Berg is a substantial singer, who actually seemed to have thought about the music before him. When he delivered "For, behold, darkness shall cover the earth," the words actually had meaning.

But meaningful moments were scarce on this evening. I cannot help feeling that Neville Marriner was disappointed, too, for he is a great man of music, whose standards have been high throughout his astonishingly prolific career. He undoubtedly knows failure—or, in this case, near failure—when he hears it. Even when he is presiding over it.

New Year's Eve? I'm glad you asked. The Philharmonic put on an all-Gershwin concert, a merry, rousing affair. Under its former director, Kurt Masur, the orchestra had the habit of performing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. But Lorin Maazel is at the helm now, and he needed his own New Year's Eve shtick. Besides which, Maazel had begun his tenure—in September—with the playing of the Ninth, a big statement, always. Moreover, he has been associated with Gershwin throughout his career. It was not until 1975, believe it or not, that *Porgy and Bess* was recorded complete. And the man who did it was Lorin Maazel.

He opened his concert with the *Cuban Overture*, which was originally titled just plain *Rumba*. This is one of the outstanding "Hispanic" pieces in the American repertory, a cousin of *El salón México* by Copland and even of stretches of Bernstein's *West Side Story*. Maazel brought to this work his customary vim. This was, simply, an infectious and bracing performance—its rhythms idiomatic, its phrasing beautiful. It seemed clear that, on this night, the Philharmonic was the swingingest band in America (with apologies to Guy Lombardo, or his successors).

Then came *An American in Paris*, Gershwin's ingenious tone poem (or, as he himself dubbed it, "rhapsodic ballet"). Maazel's account was extremely tightly controlled, but it was not controlled unwisely. The slinky section was very slinky, the big, gorgeous, blooming section was big, gorgeous, and blooming—everything was just right. And perhaps best of all, Maazel gives no hint that he feels himself slumming when conducting this music. He gives it his all, as he would in, say, a Mahler symphony. This might seem axiomatic, not even worth mentioning: but it is not true, sorry to say, of all conductors. Not by a long shot.

After intermission, the Philharmonic presented about 45 minutes of *Porgy and Bess*. These were excerpts, naturally, nicely strung together. Participating were three soloists: Indra Thomas, a soprano; Willard

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White, the well-known bass-baritone from Jamaica; and Lawrence Brownlee, a tenor (indeed, a *tenore di grazia*, fit for any number of nimble Donizetti roles). Serving as the chorus was the Ebony Ecumenical Ensemble, a local group. Our "mini-opera" had its ups and downs: but I will mention, specifically, only an up. The chorus "Oh, I Can't Sit Down" was so exuberant and delightsome, one found it hard, indeed, to stay seated.

After Sportin' Life had signaled that there was "a boat dat's leavin'," Maazel and his band offered two encores: *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, high-steppin', and, inevitably, "Auld Lang Syne," sung contentedly by the audience. About the Sousa march, I like to recall what is, for me, the most endearing thing Leonard Bernstein ever said. He said, "I'd give five years of my life to have written that." Smart man (in that instance). But how many years would one give for *Porgy and Bess*?

In the weeks that followed, the Philharmonic offered several interesting programs, including one that featured the pianist Leif Ove Andsnes. This is, as you might have gathered, one of the most ballyhooed pianists on the scene today. I have not joined in this ballyhooing—having heard some dubious performances—but, in his outing with Lorin Maazel's orchestra, Andsnes earned his kudos.

As a Norwegian, Andsnes might be expected to play the Grieg Concerto, and that is indeed what he presented with the Philharmonic. This is, of course, an easy piece to make ridiculous—all you have to do is play it ridiculously. But if you treat it with dignity and seriousness, the true excellence of the piece will emerge. That is exactly what happened under Mr. Andsnes's hands. He brought an almost Classical discipline to the piece, taming its excesses, limiting—even removing—all bombast, and making each section cohere. From beginning to end, the pianist was resolutely unsentimental. I do not say that his reading was without beauty—it had plenty. But it had an iron that made the Griegian beauty all the more beautiful, and palatable. If Andsnes played like this consistently, I, with everyone else, would ballyhoo away.

The month of January also brought a Philharmonic debut: that of Julia Fischer, a nineteen-year-old violinist from Germany. Her concerto was the Sibelius, and she handled it creditably. Miss Fischer is a poised and mature young lady. She has a fine technique, and confidence to spare. Her sound is fairly undistinguished, but it is serviceable. And she played the Sibelius rather neutrally. That is, she injected no special character, gave the work no particular impulse. Her performance was correct without being involving or powerful. One might have asked for more grit, more blood, more heart—but at least Miss Fischer refrained from emoting. And, obviously, she has the room to grow.

Before leaving the subject of the New York Philharmonic, I might make a general comment or two about Lorin Maazel, who has passed the halfway mark in his opening season. This is a conductor of whom I have long been critical, for relatively common reasons. (These might be subsumed under the single word "micromanagement.") But his virtues are shiningly apparent at Avery Fisher Hall. His recent readings of such works as Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* Fantasy Overture, and Stravinsky's *Petrushka* confirm a few things: His performances tend to be taut and polished, and they are usually quite brisk. Maazel's refusal to allow music to drag or sag is something to applaud. Conductors are notorious for slowing down as they grow old—that is, for indulging in slow tempos, which try to pass, in certain cases, for profundity. But Maazel will have none of it. He insists that the music not merely trot but breathe. This makes for a much more pleasurable experience night after night. Such works as the Fifth may be harmed by overfamiliarity; but they are positively killed by an unwanted slowness.

And Maazel has a related virtue: an avoidance of the routine; an immunity to

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clock-punching. He seems wired—charged up—every time he steps onto the podium. Whether we approve of his conducting or not, we can see that he is engaged and interested and doing (we may presume) his utmost. He may tire at some point—but that prospect now seems happily dim.

I will move on to opera shortly, but I would like to submit one more word on a matter orchestral: Leon Botstein repeatedly does interesting things with the American Symphony Orchestra, of which he is director. Botstein, of course, is one of New York's great polymaths, the president of Bard College and a wide-ranging scholar, as well as a musician. His specialty seems to be the programming of neglected works that are well worth hearing. It is for this reason that I have described him, in the past, as "an invaluable musical citizen."

A recent concert of the ASO was devoted to two works of Bruckner: the Mass No. 3 in F minor and the Symphony No. 1. This was a rare chance to hear either of these pieces. The mass has a following of admirers, those who think that it belongs to the pantheon of such choral works. These people have a point. In this mass, one hears some Bach, and some Beethoven—but one hears, primarily, the distinctive Brucknerian voice. If I were asked to describe this work in a single sentence, I'd say, "Imagine that the composer of the Bruckner symphonies had written a mass." *Voilà.*

As for the Symphony No. 1, it finds Bruckner at the very beginning of his glorious symphonic career, just as the designation suggests. We tend to start listening to the Bruckner symphonies with the Third. (We tend to do the same with the Beethoven symphonies, for that matter.) But the First should not be shoved into a corner. It is authentic Bruckner, and we should care that the composer himself—who was famously self-critical—was very fond of this opus.

Leon Botstein led both the mass and the symphony competently, but the quality of the performances mattered less than the opportunity merely to hear these works. A valuable musical citizen, yes.

In recent weeks, the Metropolitan Opera has had many successes, or partial successes: an *Elektra* with Deborah Voigt even more radiant than usual; a *Carmen* with the beguiling Denyce Graves; a *Don Giovanni* with the suave Russian Dmitri Hvorostovsky; and a typically frothy and grin-making *Die Fledermaus*—just in time for New Year's Eve. But the most extraordinary production was that of Poulenc's great opera, *Les Dialogues des Carmélites*.

For several months now, I have been quipping that 2002–03 is a bad season for the makers of the French Revolution—certainly at the Met. Early on, the company staged *Andrea Chénier*, Giordano's opera of Revolutionary betrayal and cruelty. And then came *Les Dialogues*. Liberty, equality, and fraternity, my *derrière*.

Dialogues, of course, concerns the Carmelite nuns at Compiègne, murdered by guillotine in July 1794. Part of the power of this opera lies in the fact that it is based on a true story. The roles in *Dialogues* are difficult to sing. There are not many tunes here. Instead, the opera is full of recitative-like lines, the music hewing closely to the text (and vice versa). It is a "through opera" through and through, if you'll forgive me. Unfortunately, one seldom hears a truly correct and penetrating performance of *Les Dialogues*. It requires a slew of exceptional singers and a smart, sensitive conductor.

I happened to see two of the Met's performances, the first with the "second" cast and the second with the "first." The standout in that first performance was Emily Pulley, a Texan, taking the role of Blanche de la Force (who will become Blanche of the Agony of Christ). She is a winning soprano, who filled the house with light whenever she opened her mouth. She had color, flexibility, and beauty. This woman has obviously been well trained, her voice floating on a solid platform of breath. In all, she simply put on a clinic of lyrical singing, and, as a bonus, she was utterly believable as Blanche.

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In the pit for the first performance—as he would be for the second one—was James Conlon. He is a New Yorker who has had something of a French career; he is now principal conductor of the Paris Opera. Conlon did not do Poulenc's score justice on that first night. His conducting was more dutiful and workaday than enchanting or gripping. Sure, the run-up to the guillotine had some power, but that is practically inevitable. Technically, the orchestra was a shambles—or as close to a shambles as the Met players ever get.

"What a difference a day makes," as the old song goes. For this second performance—which was the last of the run, on a Saturday afternoon, broadcast to the world over radio—Conlon seemed transformed. It was a question of night and day. The conductor was firing on all cylinders, interpretively—alert, acute, nuanced, commanding—and the orchestra was firing along with him. This reinforces the old lesson that a musician should not be judged on one performance; and that "the human factor," as I believe Graham Greene put it, must always be considered. One simply gets out of bed differently.

The "first" cast was as impressive a one as the Met is likely to field this season. It, indeed, met the requirement of a slew of exceptional singers. Taking the part of Blanche was another top-notch American soprano, Patricia Racette. She has a lovely, liquid, adaptable voice, and oodles of technique. In addition, every word she sang seemed freighted with meaning, each thought and musical phrase relating to the next, and to the one before it.

In the crucial and formidable role of the First Prioress was Felicity Palmer. She delivered nothing less than a tour de force. Where to begin? With this, perhaps: She is a composed, incisive, and searing singer. She is able to act with her voice, and with the more usual resources too. The initial exchange between her and Racette—between the Prioress and Blanche—was startlingly lifelike. What I mean by that is that it was true to life, outside an opera, somehow. As the first act continued, Palmer sang with great dignity and wisdom. Her death scene was a model of how to carry out these difficult pages: It was both musical and harrowing. It is extremely hard to strike a balance, between the histrionic and the unreasonably subdued. Felicity Palmer sensed exactly what to do.

Singing Constance was the soprano Heidi Grant Murphy. Regular readers may recall that I hailed her in these pages for a recital she gave several seasons ago. That remains one of the most accomplished vocal recitals in memory. Murphy is one of the finest light, high sopranos now working. In *Les Dialogues*, her singing was, as usual, gleaming, often gossamer, and easy. She conveyed the essence of her character, Constance, who is sincere and ebullient and also slightly worldly.

Alongside these women were Stephanie Blythe, as Mother Marie, and Christine Goerke, as the Second Prioress. Blythe is possessed of a huge voice, whose power is almost disturbing. She usually knows what to do with it. And Christine Goerke contributed assured and intelligent singing, not least in her big aria—the one big aria in the opera—"Mes filles, voilà que s'achève." I should acknowledge, too, one of the few men on stage: the tenor Matthew Polenzani. He is sweet-voiced and free, consistently pleasant to listen to. James Levine is paying him the high honor of accompanying him in his Carnegie Hall recital debut next season.

And so we are faced with Francis Poulenc's achievement, *Les Dialogues des Carmélites*. This achievement is of course musical and dramatic. But it is also one of piety and solidarity with a group of women murdered in cold blood by a totalitarian movement and regime that presaged the even more large-scale violence of the worst century of all: the twentieth. A bad season for the boys of '89 indeed. Good.

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The media

Confidence motion

by James Bowman

Not unusually, *Time* magazine's story got the thing just exactly wrong: "Whitewashing the Past" read its cover line, superimposed on the photo of a worried-looking Trent Lott. What the editors appear to have meant was that Lott himself was attempting to "whitewash" the past—his own, his state's, and his party's—either by his now notorious words of tribute to Strom Thurmond's "Dixiecrat" presidential campaign of 1948, given at Senator Thurmond's 100th birthday party (if Thurmond had been elected, he said, we wouldn't have had "all these problems" that we have had since), or in his increasingly abject apologies for them afterwards. But this was just the reversed image of Lott's own stupidity in pretending that any such thing was even remotely possible. You might as well talk of whitewashing the ocean.

Not, of course, that racism has ceased to exist. It is almost as impossible to imagine its doing so as it is to imagine any return to the respectability enjoyed by some kinds of racial prejudice in some parts of the country only a generation ago, which is what a "whitewash" would presumably entail. But if Lott affected to think such an eventuality less than preposterous out of misplaced sentimentality about a senatorial colleague, *Time*, like the rest of the media, affected to think so because of its vested interest in making a scandal. To this end the media pretended that such a whitewash was not only possible but imminent, and that not only Lott but the Republican party as well was secretly nostalgic for segregation. As *Time* put it, "Despite making four apologies by the end of the week . . . the incoming Senate leader had wounded not only himself but also his party's decade-long campaign to shed its reputation for thinly veiled race baiting."

The "reputation" to which the authors, Dan Goodgame and Karen Tumulty, referred may be news to many readers who do not keep well up on the orthodoxies of the Left—according to which appeals to the electorate based on principled doubts about the wisdom of legally-enforced affirmative action, for example, or doubts about the wisdom of furloughing convicted murderers from prison, are automatically assumed to amount to "thinly veiled race baiting." But *Time*'s careless betrayal of its *parti pris* was only a less subtle manifestation of assumptions that proved to be all but universal in the media commentary on Lott's blunder. Thus that admirable stylist, Adam Clymer, offered in *The New York Times* a more carefully worded version of the same view when he wrote that "President Bush's repudiation of Senator Trent Lott today, as an apostate to the 'founding ideals' of the Republican Party, underlined the juggling act the party has maintained on race for nearly four decades."

Come again? The president could hardly have been more unequivocal when he said

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to a predominantly black audience in Philadelphia that

> recent comments by Senator Lott do not reflect the spirit of our country. . . . He has apologized, and rightly so. Every day our nation was segregated was a day that America was unfaithful to our founding ideals. And the founding ideals of our nation and, in fact, the founding ideals of the political party I represent was [*sic*], and remains today, the equal dignity and equal rights of every American.

Surely, if words mean anything this meant that he was resolutely and admirably refusing to "juggle"? But once you have established that what people say is merely a plausible cover for what they really mean, the adumbration of what they really mean becomes fraught with imaginative possibilities, besides being for the media a *much* more essential public service than merely relaying to the public what they think they mean.

For what lay behind the larger media campaign of which *Time* and *The New York Times* were both a part was the mentality of the gaffe-patrol. Much was made of Michael Kinsley's dictum that a gaffe—in this case a "supergaffe"—"is when a politician says what he really thinks." But this is not quite accurate. Kinsley himself identifies for us, also in *Time*, his point of access to what people "really" think by saying that Lott's remarks "bubbled up from his id and escaped through his lips when his guard was down, thereby exposing an important and deeply distressing moral flaw in Lott himself." Kinsley does not think it worth his trouble to justify or apologize for his foray into amateur psychoanalysis; it is merely taken for granted—and not only by Kinsley, one suspects, but by many less learned and adept Freudians in newsrooms across the nation.

Philip Kennicott, for instance, in one of those urbanely ruminative commentaries on the news that makes *The Washington Post*'s "Style" section such a congenial home for critics and philosophers, explained why Lott-like grovelling is "such compelling spectacle" by noting that "because everyone knows that apologies are almost always wrung out reluctantly—or qualified with excuses or patently insincere—the public, for a brief moment, has the upper hand. The public makes the man dance, not for his soul but his future." Then, after a quick résumé of the views of William Empson in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Kennicott went on to conclude that "Lott's efforts to explain and excuse the remarks implicitly acknowledge the thing that makes public gaffes so disturbing: the belief (see Freud) that we tell more of the truth when our tongue slips than when we say exactly what we intend to say."

"The truth," that is, like "reality," like "the public," finds a ready spokesman in the journalist, who has grown accustomed to taking his own familiarity with such concepts for granted. In fact, however, he is interested in only certain kinds of truths. Thus if a politician "really" thinks that two and two make four—or that, say, the founding ideals of the nation include equal dignity and equal rights for every American—and he should happen to allude to these thoughts in conversation, he commits no gaffe. Neither does he, coincidentally, offer any story to the hungry journalist with a news-hole to fill. But gaffe and story alike *do* result if he says something disreputable which the media can plausibly identify as a window into some notional and psychological "reality," hidden by outward and more respectable appearances probably even from the speaker himself, which it is their *raison d'être* to open up to the public view.

This much is in the nature of the journalistic self-conceit and not dependent on the political complexion of the gaffe-maker whose psyche is being explored for the sake of the public's enlightenment. But in Lott's case the gaffe also served as an excuse for the exercise of characteristic media biases about the political philosophy of the Republican party. In fact, insofar as Lott

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could be made to stand for Republican "race-baiting," he himself could be let off the hook—hence *Time*'s handsome concession: "Most of those who know him best, foes as well as friends, say they don't consider Lott a racist in the sense of someone who hates blacks and plots to hold them down." No? Then in what sense *is* he a racist? While not actually using the term in positive identification, *Time* continues, "Rather, friends say, Lott has believed—at least until last week—that government has no business forcing one group of people to associate with another, nor should it compensate anyone for past injustices."

Fully to appreciate the idiocy of this simultaneously sly and mealy-mouthed slur, just consider the converse of its two terms. So are we to suppose that non-racists believe it is the business of governments to force people to associate with one another? So are we asked to believe that Lott doesn't believe *any* victims of injustice should be compensated? As it so often does, the sloppiness of *Time*'s writing and editing betrays its liberal and Democratic biases. Likewise, in outlining Lott's political ideas, Goodgame and Tumulty write: "He supported expanded outlays for the military, farm subsidies, rural public-works projects, Social Security and Medicare. The main federal activities he opposed were taxes, programs aimed at helping the poor and civil rights laws."

Most Americans, needless to say, oppose programs aimed at helping the poor *if they don't really help the poor*—if, in fact, they hurt the poor, which was the conservative Republican position on welfare policy before 1996. But in *Time*'s political theology, as in that of the old-fashioned "liberal" Democrats, anything "aimed at" such help is apparently tantamount to helping. Talk about a Freudian slip! *Time* also uses the term "civil rights" to describe policies that, nowadays, even most Democrats would repudiate. Lott's "resistance to civil rights," observe the authors, "was low-key but consistent. He supported a constitutional amendment in 1979 to prohibit school busing, but it failed." There are no doubt, even today, those who believe that an American's civil rights include, or ought to include, the right to be transported by bus to a school with a racial mix approved of by a federal judge. But you wouldn't be able to tell from *Time* that it is also possible to support civil rights without believing this.

Yet let us leave aside for the moment the question of the Republican party's cryptoracism. Let us, indeed, stipulate that it exists. My point is that the media will always and *necessarily* exaggerate it because the foundational mythologies, especially of Watergate and Vietnam, on which they base their claims to moral authority require them to do so. Their very existence—at least their existence as the "objective" and "non-partisan" moral arbiters they pretend to be—depends on their ability to persuade the public that reality and appearance are at variance, and that they are uniquely placed to offer us the keys to reality. Thus, while it is easy to believe that Senator Lott, like other white Mississippians, might well be in two minds about the history of race relations in the South, it takes the media to tell us that the part of him inclined to be indulgent towards the past is more "real" than the part which later professed to find it "wrong" and "terrible."

Of course, it is true that Lott wanted to be the Senate majority leader, and he eventually realized that this would not be possible unless he could persuade the media that his racially enlightened side was more "real" than his racially unreconstructed side. This was in itself a reason to believe that the opposite was the case. But such ontological calculations had in the end very little to do with anything in—please pardon the expression—the "real" world. The very fact that Lott felt constrained to apologize so incontinently was the measure of the extent to which the original offense was actually a trivial one, and without any bearing on actual political behavior, since it showed how inconceivable it was that anyone with anything like genuinely segregationist views

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could survive electorally in American politics.

This made it all but certain that, as many a wise media head pointed out at the time, the Democrats would have preferred him to remain as a convenient Aunt Sally for them, as Newt Gingrich used to be, during the next electoral cycle. Former President Clinton, who did such a brilliant job of demonizing Gingrich, led the way when he said that Republican criticism of Lott was "hypocritical" since what he said was only what their party does "on the back roads every day." Huh? The Republicans practice segregation on the back roads every day? No. Clinton was pretty obviously alluding, with a characteristic mastery of the spin-master's vocabulary, to another of the features of the Jim Crow South: lynching. Here was a type of ambiguity that never occurred to William Empson!

Thus ever to Republican race-baiting, the Democrats might say. But alas, Lott the lyncher was snatched away from political dismemberment in their spin-machine at the last moment—not that they won't find some use for him even on the back benches. Clinton's contemptible hinting, so reminiscent of his vice-president's intimation in the last presidential campaign that George W. Bush approved of the racially motivated murder of James Byrd, Jr., in Jasper, Texas, naturally obscured the real reason why Lott showed himself to be unfit to be the Republican leader. His appearance with Ed Gordon on BET was excruciatingly, toe-curlingly embarrassing, so much so that he appeared to have Richard Nixon's or Al Gore's sublime unconsciousness of the embarrassment he ought to have felt for saying such obviously phony things as that he was in favor of affirmative action because he had black people on his senatorial staff. "My actions," he claimed, referring to these same benefactions, "do not reflect my voting record."

Oh dear, oh dear! Could he really have been bragging that he was a hypocrite on race, cynically exploiting the racism of his fellow whites and not its black victims? The absurdity of the apology was even more grotesque than that of the original offense. About both we could say, as Robert Musil says of national claims to "redemption" under the old Hapsburg empire in *The Man Without Qualities*, "it was not so much the words that offended a healthy common sense as their absurd claim to being taken literally." In asking to be forgiven, Lott had all but made forgiveness impossible. Clearly, it was time for him to show his first bit of genuine shame and vacate a position of which he had become less an adornment than ever.

Still, a part of me hated to see him go if only because it was another melancholy step on the road towards the media's dominance of our political system. America appears to be struggling toward a variation on the parliamentary system in which politicians are disciplined by the necessity to retain the confidence not of their peers but of the major daily newspapers and the television networks. And, so far from being troubled by this unofficial and undemocratic amendment to the Constitution, the media themselves cheerfully reported the deference of the politicians to their media masters as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Thus Dana Milbank and Jim VandeHei of the *Washington Post* reported early on that "Republican senators, including some who criticized Lott's comments in private, said his job appears safe so far, although several said things could change dramatically if the controversy is not quelled soon."

Did it occur to Messrs. Milbank and VandeHei sternly to ask their anonymous interlocutors: Do you have confidence in your leader or not? Did they think to say: Surely you cannot be so craven as to suggest—even if it were true—that you intend to wait and see whether *we*, and our colleagues of the media who are responsible for this "controversy," have confidence in him before you decide whether or not you do? They did not. By now both the media and the politicians implicitly accept the right of the former to judge the latter, who

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are left feebly to hope for mercy when they stumble into gaffe-land. Thus, "if Lott can weather the storm a few more days," those unnamed senators told Milbank and VandeHei, "they believe the controversy will blow over."

At least Senator Hagel of Nebraska allowed his own name to appear in *The New York Times* attached to a similarly agnostic statement signifying his acquiescence in whatever verdict the media should ultimately render: "How serious it yet becomes, I don't know." Earlier, even the Democrats' leader, Tom Daschle, was inclined to minimize the importance of Lott's remarks until he "found himself under pressure among his colleagues to toughen his position" (according to the *Post*). This may well be true, but it was probable that the pressure he cared about came less from his colleagues than from the media, whose promotion of the "controversy" demanded some factitious outrage from him. As Martha Brant of *Newsweek* said on CNBC in reporting her editor's insistence that "you need to find the next scooplet" dredged up from Lott's past utterances, "Frankly, we're now in the media going to give this thing steam. The Democrats may not even need to fan the flames of this."

Nor, of course, did they. Their own race-baiting was kept largely out of it, apart from occasional Daschle-like statements of "concern." Yet neither the media's willingness to carry water for the Democrats nor their untroubled delight in appointing themselves arbiters of "truth" and "reality" for "the public" was as worrying as the unquestioning acceptance by our political class of the media's new and quasi-constitutional function in deciding what words, or even what states of mind, unfit a man for holding public office. After the last Tory party conference in Britain, W. F. Deedes, the veteran reporter and former editor of the *Daily Telegraph,* wrote:

> "Tell me your secret worries," I said softly to Tories at Bournemouth with a moment to spare. A surprising number mentioned the power of the news media. Powerful guns, they thought, were hammering people in politics and feeding public mistrust of them.
>
> Labour has the same feeling, I suggested lightly, which is why it employs so many spin doctors. But, on reflection, I think there is substance in this feeling that journalists and broadcasters have grown more dominant. Leading news media figures today cut stronger figures in the public eye than many ministers and almost all in the shadow cabinet.
>
> "What's wrong with that?" the media pundits will say. "We are your guardians against perfidious politicians—and look how many of those we have had to expose in recent times." That's a smart answer, but incomplete. With experience of politicians going back to the 1930s, I would say that today's lot are not a whit less honest and trustworthy. But the news media are much sharper in exposing their frailties. A good thing, too, you may say. Not altogether, if it induces a cynical public to despise public figures as second-rate. As some of my witnesses at Bournemouth pointed out, the news media are now seen by able young people as a more rewarding career than public life. Why? Because they sense that is where power now lies.

Years ago, when it was suggested to William F. Buckley, Jr., that he should run for the Senate, he quoted approvingly John Kenneth Galbraith's observation that the Senate was "a good forum—if you have no other." Now that spin rules all and the media decide what Senators shall be allowed to say, it's not even that.

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Books

The scabrous lyricism of Thomas Bernhard

by Eric Ormsby

With his elongated and bulbous nose, his pockmarked cheeks and his sly ruminative glance, invariably from under half-closed lids, Thomas Bernhard seemed more a Tyrolean version of W. C. Fields than the major shit-disturber of modern German literature. I mean this quite literally: as Gitta Honegger reports in her fine new book,[1] at the 1984 Salzburg premiere of his play *Theatermacher* (the English translation is misleadingly named *Histrionics*), an actual dung-heap, fuming and malodorous, held center-stage and served as a synecdoche for Austria itself.

In the third volume of his inimitable autobiography he writes: "All my life I have been a trouble-maker, and I shall go on being the trouble-maker my relatives always said I was. . . . Throughout my life my very existence has always made trouble. I have always troubled and irritated people. Everything I write, everything I do, is a source of trouble and irritation. Some people leave others in peace, while others—of whom I am one—cause them trouble and irritation." The obsessive repetition of certain phrases—in this case, "trouble and irritation"—is typical of Bernhard's style and is, of course, designed precisely to trouble and irritate. In his notorious interviews—he insisted on giving one at a bullfight in Madrid—he could sound positively deranged, a droll amalgam of Wittgenstein with the Katzenjammer Kids, but in his prose, that maniacal hilarity was turned to cool and lethal effect. Indeed, there is something almost sculptural in the staggering dementia of his Gargantuan sentences; as Honegger notes, the opening sentence of his story "Ja" ("Yes") is 477 words long. But these sentences, while never really "high style," have a careening beauty that confounds and captivates the reader.

Bernhard is not yet respectable (as Céline, and now even Jean Genet, luxuriously swaddled in the sleek leather-bound volumes of the Pléiade series, threaten to become), and that adds a certain scandalous piquancy to his appeal. I have had the experience of surprising a sudden revulsion on the faces of German speakers when I have mentioned Bernhard's name. Beyond the irrepressible pleasures of *Schadenfreude*—there is always something a bit comical in the righteous indignation of others—what is it about Thomas Bernhard and his work that still elicits this queer conflicted response of fascination and disgust?

Bernhard was not simply a gadfly, a *Störenfried*, like Karl Kraus, but someone who unearthed, and relished unearthing, the most unsavory aspects of the national past: principally the Austrian enthusiasm for Hitler, its native son, and for the Nazis, as well as Austrian collaboration in the persecution of the Jews and other "outsiders."

1 *Thomas Bernhard: The Making of an Austrian*, by Gitta Honegger; Yale University Press, 359 pages, $29.95.

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Even worse, in Bernhard's implacable view, the attitudes that made Nazism popular in Austria continued unabated in his native land. But the ultimate moral ugliness for Bernhard is that post-war Austria had become nothing more than a swindler's paradise, a kind of corrupt and mendacious emporium (*Geschäftshaus*) where the lie reigns supreme and the only values are crassly mercantile.

Perhaps it is significant that there seems to be no real equivalent in German for the English term "shit-disturber," which I used at the outset: the word doesn't figure in German because the role is not merely *verboten* but virtually inconceivable: to make the private public, the hidden manifest—to breach the stricture of *totschweigen* ("dead silence")—is shameful and unpardonable in Austrian and German culture. In her preface Honegger suggests the epithet *Nestbeschmutzer*, "someone who soils his own nest," and no doubt many Austrians have thought of Bernhard in this way, but the term addresses only one aspect of Bernhard's trouble-making—the embarrassment it provokes—and doesn't do justice to the mischievous accuracy of his disturbing-stick. Certainly if the home-nest stank, Bernhard drew unflinching attention to its reek, and did so with undisguised gusto, throughout his entire career. Hardly startling then that such exposure of ugly "Austrian truths" hidden beneath a blithe Alpine sheen should arouse mingled loathing and fascination.

But Bernhard the novelist is also a master of complicity. The reader is drawn, sometimes unwillingly, into his rambling, circular monologues by the kind of coldly Cartesian zaniness they exhibit; we seem to be eavesdropping on a lunatic but one whose discourse strangely involves us. Of course, there is a certain morbid satisfaction in being made a witness to his demolition of those staid yet lubricious Viennese facades, all that shrill gaiety, those cupolas of *Schlagsahne*, that lacy fretwork of waltzes; in reading Bernhard, it is as though we were observing a canny street-rat assaulting a Sachertorte. For the fraudulence of the light-hearted Viennese myth—indeed, the Austrian self-myth—has never been so relentlessly and savagely exploded as in Bernhard's plays, stories, and novels. Of course, Bernhard's ferocity towards his native land and his compatriots is so vehement because he is himself secretly tinged by the very vices he castigates and because, more shaming still, there is a drastic attachment, a kind of poisonous affection, in the ties that lash him to his *Heimat*, his home.

Bernhard is one of those singular writers who seem almost to elect their readers. I know because I found myself quite unexpectedly under his spell some years ago. While living in Prague I formed the habit of spending the afternoons at the Goethe Institute on the right bank of the Vltava; there, in a palatial nineteenth-century building, I could browse through the entire range of German and Austrian literature and there too, one day, I came across Bernhard's last novel, aptly entitled *Extinction* (*Auslöschung*). From the first elephantine yet nimble sentences I was spellbound. Not long after I began to read Bernhard's autobiography, arguably his masterpiece, and from the first sentence I knew that I had come across a "kindred spirit."

In the third volume of the autobiography, *Der Keller* (*The Cellar*), Bernhard describes how his life changed when he decided, as a schoolboy, to go "in the opposite direction" (*die entgegengesetzte Richtung*) from his Gymnasium one morning. He found himself in the meanest quarter of Salzberg, the Scherzhauserfeld Project, amid drunks, the disabled, the unemployable, the outcasts of proper Austrian society—those very "low-lifes," in fact, whom the Nazis had sought to exterminate—and he promptly took a job as an apprentice in a cellar-store. This was his liberation and the beginning of his true life. As I read I felt a kinship with the adolescent Bernhard. I too had once gone in "the opposite direction," leaving Columbia University and a full scholarship abruptly in 1960 to work in a succession of menial jobs:

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messenger, short-order cook, busboy, dog washer. And I too had felt liberated by my sudden immersion in what I then thought of as "the real world." I recognized the exuberance the young Bernhard felt in his new milieu, and I also understood the fascinated compassion he came to experience among his new acquaintances, a compassion that grew as he himself entered ever more into these other lives so starkly different from his own, a sympathy, it must be said, complicated by his own deepening entanglement in the workaday world of a despised slum.

In fact, it is Bernhard's hard, clear-eyed compassion which finally makes of him, in my estimation at least, a writer of lasting significance and depth. His scathing antics, the well-nigh hysterical hilarity of much of his writing, his unmitigated denunciations of the fraud and mendacity of Austrian post-war society, the magic intricacy of his prose—all these make him a writer to be reckoned with, in the long cantankerous line of Austrian cranks of genius, Karl Kraus again, or the sublimely goofy Nestroy. I cannot help wondering too (though Honegger says nothing about this) whether Bernhard was not stylistically influenced by the fantastic verbal hijinx of his compatriot, the eccentric novelist and artist Fritz von Herzmanovski-Orlando, virtually unknown outside Austria (where his works have now appeared in ten stout volumes). What Honegger terms "Bernhard-speak," that inimitable amalgam of scabrous lyricism, may have had its genesis in Herzmanovsky-Orlando's mordant wordplay (though Bernhard surely would have loathed that rumbustious scribbler's lifelong anti-Semitism). Still, verbal agility aside, it is the fellow-feeling which permeates Bernhard's work, and especially his empathy with the poor, the despised, the forgotten, the failures and misfits, that gives his writing a half-hidden tenderness made even more piercing by his fury.

Though Bernhard professed a distaste for nature and the countryside, he was also fiercely drawn to both, as his poetry attests. And the stubborn earthiness of his prose, coupled with his flair for pungent invective, may owe something to his rural origins. In an early poem, "My Great-Grandfather Was a Lard-Dealer," Bernhard revealed both his closeness to his country background and his distance from it. The poem, in my own rough-and-ready translation, reads:

> My great-grandfather was a lard-dealer
> and today
> everyone still knows him
> from Henndorf to Thalgau,
> Seekirchen to Kästendorf,
> and they hear his voice
> and move
> as one to his table
> which was also the Lord's table.
> In 1881, in spring,
> he decided in favor of life: he planted
> a vine along the wall of the house
> and summoned the beggars;
> Maria, his wife, she with the black ribbon,
> gave him another thousand years of life.
> He discovered the music of swine
> and the fire of bitterness,
> he spoke of wind
> and of the weddings of the dead.
> He wouldn't give a bacon-bit
> for my bouts of despair.

The poem is at once reverent and sardonic. The great-grandfather "decided in favor of life" (*entschied er sich für das Leben*), perhaps in tacit contrast to his more tormented descendant, but he was also a "lard-dealer" (*Schmalzhändler*): *Schmalz* is not only pork fat or drippings but, as every New Yorker knows, whatever is coyly mawkish, sloppily sentimental; for all his implicit insubstantiality, the great-grandson has a sharp bite. The final word of the poem, the untranslatable plural noun *Verzweiflungen* ("despairs"), an airy nothing of a word, is, however, set against the earthy solidity of the pig-grease his ancestor dealt in, and specifically against the unctuous thickness of the phrase *kein Stück Speck*.

The great-grandfather is one of many elders in Bernhard's work, like the dogged but ultimately defeated grandfather of the autobiography who works day after day at 3

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A.M.—the time rings like a refrain through Bernhard's account—at his novel *The Valley of the Seven Courts* "which he planned as a book of five hundred manuscript pages." Nothing could better display the close strands of affection which bound grandfather and grandson than the 1937 photograph of the two of them sitting side by side on the grass beneath a massive oak tree; the grandfather, Johannes Freumbichler (himself a local author of some renown), wears a crisp Panama hat and leans forward indulgently to listen to young Thomas who already as a six-year old has an intent and quizzical mien. (The photo is reproduced in Kurt Hoffmann's *Aus Gesprächen mit Thomas Bernhard*, the record of a twelve-year series of interviews concluded only by Bernhard's death in 1989.)

Fortunately, most of Bernhard's novels, and a number of his plays, are available in English from the University of Chicago Press, all in excellent translations and attractive formats (the series is continuing, with three of his novellas forthcoming this spring).[2] These, together with Honegger's new study, easily the best introduction in English, give the reader without German a marvelous entrée to this strange and difficult author. Honegger knows Bernhard's entire oeuvre in impressive detail, including not only poetry, prose, and drama, but interviews, videos, and other published sources (Bernhard's correspondence and his papers are still unavailable and remain, as Honegger puts it, "under the (tight) control of a few Austrian scholars"). Austrian-born herself and a distinguished "dramaturg" (a position she held both at Yale and at the Catholic University of America), she has an especially fine feel for Bernhard's theater. She is equally astute and clear-sighted in pursuit of her exceedingly slippery subject, delighting in his contradictions but rarely blinded by them; she did have the advantage—or perhaps, for a biographer, the disadvantage—of knowing Bernhard well during the last ten years of his life. The book is as much about modern Austria as about its most famous bad boy and Honegger's valuable digressions, which she groups under the heading "Heimat" or "excursions," set Bernhard solidly in his native context. Honegger writes well and often quite wittily. Thus, in describing Bernhard's grandfather, she can speak of his "spirit of horny rebellion;" she is also good in deciphering various untranslatable Austrian locutions, for example, the term *Lebensmensch*—more than "companion," the compound denotes a lifelong relationship with an intimate "endowed with moral depth." Bernhard used the word to characterize Hedwig Stavianicek, "an elegant, no-nonsense woman from an old officer's family," who sheltered and protected Bernhard in her own apartment for decades, despite a thirty-year difference in their ages (Bernhard was only nineteen when he came under her wing). At the same time, Honegger is admirably discreet about her subject's private life and refrains from regaling us with any lurid discussions of his oft-alleged homosexuality. In addition she has selected an array of wonderful photographs which bring Bernhard and his milieu immediately alive.

Honegger is also good on Bernhard's vexed and tangled relations with certain exemplary predecessors, such as Glenn Gould and Wittgenstein. Bernhard loved music and had been formally trained as a musician and so the links with Gould are perhaps not so unexpected (Gould figures in his 1983 novel *The Loser*). Nevertheless, his obsession with, and immersion in, the works of his compatriot Ludwig Wittgenstein—and indeed, the whole family Wittgenstein—are another matter altogether. In Honegger's intelligent discussion, Wittgenstein emerges as a sort of shadowy "secret sharer" to Bernhard, as though the latter's works were partly intended as an oblique exegesis on much of the philosopher's terse and labyrinthine thought. Easily the most entertaining part of Honegger's study, however, deals with Paul Wittgenstein, the dapper, enigmatic and

2 *Three Novellas*, by Thomas Bernhard; University of Chicago Press, 184 pages, $25.

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quite outrageous grand-nephew of Ludwig (and the subject of Bernhard's memoir *Wittgenstein's Nephew*). In her delightful excursus, Paul with his dandified shenanigans comes to seem the very prototype of those obsessive figures who play so conspicuous a part in Bernhard's writing.

Among the seething contradictions of Bernhard's life and work, the most intriguing is perhaps the stark contrast between his public role as self-appointed castigator of Austrian turpitude and his zealously guarded private life. This exposer of others immured his own life in an almost unbreachable secrecy. While it is to Honegger's credit that she respects his privacy, her reticence does tantalize the reader unduly at times. Laden with every honor an outraged citizenry could bestow, Bernhard yet withheld his inmost self, and did so to the last. Did he mean to spark, or to quell, curiosity? So, too, in his notorious will, he stipulated that no performance or even publication of his work was to be allowed in Austria until the copyright had expired. Predictably enough, and as this posthumous troublemaker surely knew, his will provoked what Honegger calls "a nationwide drama of legal evasions and ethical speculations that threatens never to end." Even in death, Bernhard headed resolutely in the opposite direction.

Horace for our time?

J. D. McClatchy, editor Horace: The Odes. New Translations by Contemporary Poets. Princeton University Press, 240 pages, $24.95

reviewed by D. S. Carne-Ross

I see my reputation is at stake;
My fame is shrewdly gored.
—*Troilus and Cressida*, III.2.227-8

Horace's four books of odes have faced the test of time more successfully than any body of poems in western literature. Here, translated by "the leading poets of the day" (I quote from the editor's description of this anthology), he faces in the most literal sense a stiffer test, since his Latin originals stand to the left of the English versions. A dubious practice, suggesting that he licenses what is happening to his right.

Fifteen of the editor's thirty-five poets have won prizes for their work. This is reassuring news, yet poets are not always at their best with the difficult art of verse translation. Trying to be what academics call faithful, they may on occasion be as crudely literal as Robert Creeley is in his version of a love poem (*Odes* I.19) where a girl is noted for her *grata protervitas*—she is provocative in an attractive way. "Her amorous forwardness," Creeley translates. The Latin has not quite been felt into verse, one might say.

Elsewhere we find the poet, released from the tether of the literal, giving us his version of a poem (3.26) about an amorist who looks back on his career with urbane self-complacency. Horace begins:

> Vixi puellis nuper idoneus
> et militavi non sine gloria

(Till lately I have lived on easy terms with girls, and fought [in love's battles] not without renown.) Creeley writes:

> No problems with life,
> at least from those I've loved, who testify
> I've done all right
>
> till now.

"Where is this in the Latin?" the classicist asks angrily, unaware that Creeley is now employing the mode of translation known as creative. Walter de la Mare neatly describes the liberties this mode permits: "Whatever Miss T eats turns into Miss T." Exactly. Horace has been turned into Creeley.

Brief though it is, the poem has room for a surprise ending, for it turns out that the man is only pretending to give up his love life since Chloe says no. So he asks Venus to punish her:

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Please flick just once
with your imperious whip
young Chloë's disdaining bum.

With this, Creeley puts the finishing touch to his wreckage of an adroit and pleasing composition.

Finding today's speech for Horace drives some translators to unnecessarily desperate measures. In *Donec gratus eram tibi* (3.9—When I was dear to you), a light-hearted dialogue between two lovers who have separated and want to come together again, the man looks back to the time when he could embrace his girl. Straight-forward enough, yet C. K. Williams, rising to what he takes to be the occasion (Horace is after all a classic), writes: "When I was wound round luminous/ you . . ." Wound round—like a python? Come now. Horace can be droll, but he is never ridiculous.

Some of these translators sound like Housman's Shropshire Lad, "a stranger and afraid/ In a world I never made." In *Odes* 3.6, a girl who has lost her morals and looks forward to wanton love affairs is said to be "overcome by profligate desire." The translator is not some Victorian curate gingerly facing the licentious ancients, but Richard Howard, an urbane fellow who does not write like this when he is working with French texts nearer our own time.

To put the point another way, some translators behave like people ill at ease at a party to which they have not been invited. In a poem (2.8) about a young woman called Barina whose deplorable conduct has not made her look less attractive, Heather McHugh, probably wishing that she had stayed at home, begins like this:

Were even a single penalty incurred, Barina,
for the sum
of all your violate vows, or were you
one tooth uglier,
one nail more broken, for the
now-enormous volume
of your broken word,

I might be able to believe you.

Perhaps it is unfair to turn to Sir Charles Sedley in the eighteenth century, a period when the art of verse composition had reached a high level, and watch him making his way through the Latin with practiced social ease:

Did any Punishment attend
Thy former Perjuries,
I should believe a second time
Thy charming Flatteries;
Did but one wrinkle mar this Face,
Or hadst thou lost one single Grace . . .

Rather free, and no wrinkle in the Latin, granted, but Sir Charles has given us a poem for a poem. So too in our own day did James Michie in his complete translation of the *Odes* (Penguin Classics, 1967):

Barinë, if for perjured truth
Some punishment had ever hurt you—
One blemished nail or blackened tooth—
I might believe this show of virtue.

The translator's lot is a hard one, for Michie's accomplished performance has been scandalously little recognized. Write well, and you will probably be ignored; badly, and you risk being praised by people (Milton puts it very well) "Of whom to be disprais'd were no small praise."

If Horace's social or convivial poems raise problems of tone and diction, one would expect that the proud Roman note of the big public poems would be even harder to catch in our humbler day—witness almighty America's anxiety about going it alone. Yet the editor, J. D. McClatchy, strikes it well in *Descende caelo* (3.4) without going beyond the bounds of today's speech:

Descend from heaven, divine Calliope,
And play upon your flute a long slow song
Or, accompanied by Apollo's lyre,
Sing in your own clear voice.

More difficult is the line from the sixth ode of the same book where Horace re-

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minds Rome of the cost of neglecting the religious observances that made it great: "dis te minorem quod geris, imperas." (It is because you hold yourself subject to the gods that you rule.) Apparently puzzled by this, Richard Howard writes: "Once you ruled by religion; honor your gods." Ruling by religion makes Horace sound like an Iranian mullah. The line was dear to Kipling, one of our great Horatian poets (he could write Horatian odes himself), who rightly saw it as an expression of the piety that should temper the pride of imperial power. The weighty, pregnant Latin is hard to capture today. The best translation was made in the eighteenth century by William Oldisworth: "You reign by bowing to the Gods Commands." Note the word order, with "reign" coming before "bowing." There is pride as well as piety here. Time has turned the imperial city into a tourist trap, and a whole dimension of the *Odes* is now almost beyond our reach.

I have not been able to find much to praise in this anthology, but some successes there are. The translator who sounds most like Horace is Carl Phillips, possibly because he knows Horace's language, having taught high school Latin for eight years. Wasting no words, he provides a tightly written version of *Odes* 1.32, and unlike some of his colleagues does not feel the need to give Horace a helping hand by adding decorative jerks of his own invention.

He begins: "This I pray." Unhappily, the facing Latin provided by the editor gives *poscimur*, the passive voice (I am asked or called on), a variant reading inferior in sense to the text that Phillips is obviously translating which gives *poscimus*, the active voice. This must be what Horace wrote, for the poem is a prayer to the lyre:

> This I pray:
>
> if ever in shadowed
> ease I made of song
>
> something lasting for
> this year, and more—

Richard Wilbur, an experienced translator, turns in a responsible version of the ode on the golden mean (2.10), not perhaps a great favorite today, but part of the oeuvre that should not be neglected. John Hollander builds a sturdy stanza for the popular Soracte ode (1.9) and for others in the same metre, resembling the stanza that Tennyson invented, "representing in some measure the grandest of metres, the Horatian alcaic," and used in "The Daisy" and "To the Rev. F. D. Maurice." Rosanna Warren takes a seldom translated ode, the second of the first book, about the time when the Tiber burst its banks and flooded the city: "We saw the mustard Tiber, his waves flung back/ passionately from the Tuscan shore" (*vidimus flavum Tiberim, retortis/ litore Etrusco violenter undis*). Boldly she tackles the great poem in the fourth book, *Diffugere nives, redeunt iam gramina campis*, which Housman's superb rendering has almost put out of bounds to translators. She does not rival the master, yet one may prefer "we're nothing but dust and shade" to Housman's "We are dust and dreams," too bland perhaps for the slow thunder of *pulvis et umbra sumus*.

Horace, the Horace-in-translation of the *Odes*, has become the Vivaldi of classical verse. We seem determined in these late lean days to keep him with us as a vital poetic presence and friend. Since our Latin is shaky or nonexistent, he must be translated. This anthology shows how he fares when he is handed over to contemporary poets who, probably having no Latin, must do what they can to dredge up from the Loeb prose the elements of a poem. The editor, who has to pilot Horace through the quicksands of modern verse, is or should be at hand to tell them how far the poem they have extracted by this means does bear any resemblance to a Horatian ode. McClatchy, however, does not appear to know Latin, since he tells us that "the word Horace himself used to describe these poems was *carminae* or 'songs.'" (Since when was *carmen* a first declension noun?) Lacking a first-hand familiarity with Horace's poetry, he has allowed too many ungainly travesties to pass muster.

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Since our poets can do little to keep Horace alive, we should perhaps call on our technology to come to the rescue and provide us with a Horatian cassette: a generous selection from the *Odes* read by someone who can make classical Latin sound like a living language. Anyone who had once heard the first line of the ode to Pyrrha (1.5), and felt how seemly and companionable it is—"Quis multa gracilis te puer in rosa"—would surely have striven to come up with something better than the line which here introduces it: "What slip of a boy, all slick with what perfumes."

The reader deserves to be told that the back cover of this book carries a handsome endorsement from Harold Bloom: "J. D. McClatchy's extraordinary collection gives us the richest version of Horace's odes ever made available in English." I hate to add anything to Professor Bloom's reading-list, but should he have time to consult the recent anthology *Horace in English* (Penguin Classics, 1996), he would find that the odes have been translated by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, Sidney, Ben Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Crashaw, Cowley, Dryden, Pope, Samuel Johnson, Wordsworth, Byron, Tennyson, Hopkins, Housman, Kipling (whose "Translation of ode 5.3" makes English observe the contour of Horatian Latin), Pound, Bunting, and David Ferry. Are we to believe that all these poets have been outdone by the leading poets of McClatchy's day?

Becoming Darwin

Janet Browne Charles Darwin: The Power of Place. Alfred A. Knopf, 624 pages, $37.50

reviewed by Paul R. Gross

There were hagiographers at work in the heyday of whiggish history of science, but for decades that breed has been nearly extinct. Nevertheless at least one of their saints remains exalted. Only the most flamboyant postmodernists and feminist epistemologists still try to topple Charles Darwin from his eminence. Those efforts are aimed, moreover, not so much at Darwin himself or his scientific results as at the social context of his achievements: Victorian society, capitalism, empire, the idea that there is something biological (rather than purely social) about differences between the sexes. Yet the tide of trendy iconoclasm, too, is receding. Historians of science are again engaging with the science.

To be sure, denunciation of Darwin by creationists continues unabated, no less today than in the 1860s. But it is of far less intellectual consequence now, evolutionary biology having in the meantime grown enormously—far beyond what even Darwin could have imagined. He is one of the most written-about scientists, and now there is the triumphant publication of *The Power of Place*, the second and final volume of Janet Browne's biography. Browne has had access, heretofore unavailable, to Darwin research and documents, especially the Darwin correspondence. She is uniquely qualified to write this story, by her background in biology and history, by virtue of her manifest literary gifts, and by her long and fruitful absorption in it. The result, as Ernst Mayr said of *Voyaging* (1996)—the first of her two volumes—is a "masterpiece." Darwin's intellectual progress and the formation of his character are here explored to unprecedented depth. It is no surprise that surprises emerge, not all of them pleasant.

The kindly Charles Darwin, this most unassuming, most self-abnegating, most *grateful* of scientific heroes, had among his many benefactors two who were truly indispensable to his career. The first was his Cambridge university teacher and friend, the cleric and professor of botany John Stevens Henslow, a lifelong promoter of his former pupil in the power centers of science. It was Henslow who proposed young Darwin, a rank novice, for the position of gentleman-naturalist on the epochal five-year (1831–1836) globe-girdling voyage of HMS *Beagle*. That voyage yielded priceless

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geographic and hydrologic data; but Darwin's findings eventually changed forever the way educated people view themselves.

The other influential mentor was the celebrated geologist Charles Lyell. His ideas about earth-history and mechanisms of geologic change, along with Thomas Malthus's contention that populations tend to grow to the limit of their food supply, were crucial to Darwin's mature theory of evolution. Henslow and Lyell, Darwin's seniors, predeceased him. Because he was himself already an eminence, and because of his debts to these two, he should have been their visible public mourner, a celebrant, a pallbearer at their funerals. He was physically able to be that. But Darwin excused himself, and, characteristically, sent substitutes.

Browne's two volumes present many such deflationary examples. When it came to his work, Charles Darwin was a shameless exploiter. He manipulated family, friends, and supporters. They in turn influenced scientific—and ultimately public—opinion on his behalf. Nevertheless, the wonder of this work, 1,200 pages in total, is that the Darwin who emerges, in the round, *remains* the saint of science portrayed in less critical, less richly documented accounts. He was, to be sure, flawed, but the quality of his work, the adamantine honesty of his methods and his writing, and the clarity of his insights into the living world, hugely outweighed his shortcomings. He was lucky in family—especially in his wife, Emma Wedgwood, in his children, in friends, in opportunities made possible by his position in society. He was lucky because his foibles were seen, by everyone who knew him and his work, as insignificant.

Browne's second volume is subtitled *The Power of Place*. This has a double meaning. "Place" means position; it means birth, economic standing, social status, opportunities for what is now called "networking." In all those, Darwin's endowments were more than adequate. He lived during the inexorable ascent of the middle class. The success of Darwin's father, Robert Waring Darwin, as a physician and investor put the Shrewsbury Darwins near the top of social life. They were cousins and marital partners of the Staffordshire Wedgwoods. The Wedgwoods were manufacturing champions and cultured people. Their superb chinaware was sold and coveted worldwide. In due course Charles Darwin had available to him, then, by class and social ties, a significant subset of Britain's intellectual elite. Janet Browne untangles the threads of those reticulated connections, showing how they helped, why they were indeed essential to, the genesis and success of Darwin's eventually subversive discoveries. Someone in a lesser place might not have succeeded at all.

But "place" has also a literal meaning. It means home, Charles and Emma Darwin's home, the house they bought (with money advanced by Darwin's father) and made their own. This was Down House, near Downe village, in Kent. After Charles had returned from his voyage on the *Beagle,* he set himself promptly to hard work. He wrote up his assiduously maintained journals and produced from them an excellent and, surprisingly, a best-selling book, *Journal of Researches* (1839). He wrote and published impeccable geology and natural history based on his notes, fossils, and specimen collections from the voyage. But after his marriage to Emma, he and Emma found London dirty and distracting. Their quarters were cramped: they became a family with small children. Despite Emma's initial misgivings, they moved to a house deep in the country. Down House became the well-found vessel of a Victorian family life, on a rural deep with which Charles and all the children were thereafter in daily and intimate contact.

Only the marvelous Victorian postal service could make of this remote place a node in the expanding network of nineteenth-century ideas—on nature, including the history of the earth and its living creatures, on progress, on man in a changing world. But it was a refuge, too. Here an increasingly reclusive Darwin, who suffered from

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lengthening bouts of sickness,[1] could attend to his private devil while Emma and the others (servants, children) managed all details of daily life except finance. To money management Darwin did attend: with his gift for recording and absorbing detail, he did the job as well as his father had. But the private devil was an insistent, undeniable, irksome need to find an explanation for the diversity of life, for the origin of species. It had to be an honest explanation; it could give no quarter to myth, folk tale, parable, ecstasy, prophetic hyperbole, cultic terrors. An explanation, therefore, that could be verified or falsified by the ordinary means of natural science.

The power of this place at Downe was that it made possible both Darwin's unimpeded internal struggle with ideas and a remarkable output of finished work in descriptive and experimental biology. Even his enemies, the angry denouncers of his ideas about the origin of species, had to concede its technical merit. A great strength of Janet Browne's biography is to dramatize, via correspondence and other historical material, the Darwins at home. She makes the power of the place come alive for us in our servant-free, anti-Victorian world. Darwin would surely not have succeeded in any really different place. It was residence, sickroom, and dispensary (with Emma's compassionate nursing always on call), greenhouse, zoo, research laboratory. It was the fully-equipped incubator, during his most challenging years, of the people he loved most, and who loved him. In Down House, the maturing Darwin, a dutiful, cheerful, conventionally complaisant personality, reconstructed himself over decades, reluctantly, as a scientific revolutionist.

Reluctant he was, of course, because although the ideas were his (and, for a time, those of his co-proponent Alfred Russel Wallace), the actual skirmishes with traditionalists and obscurantists had to be fought by others on Darwin's behalf. He shrank from any combat *viva voce*. Most visibly, they were fought by the brilliant Thomas Henry Huxley, who earned for his proselytizing efforts the sobriquet "Darwin's bulldog." Less visibly but quite as effectively, the battles, polite as they may have been, were fought by scientific friends and a host of correspondents—by Lyell, for example, and Joseph Hooker, the leading British botanist, by the intelligent and upright Asa Gray at Harvard, defending Darwin against the derogations of Harvard's Louis Agassiz, and by philosophers such as Herbert Spencer. Even such reverend friends as Henslow and his cousin William Darwin Fox disputed, decorously of course, *for* him and against orthodoxy on the species question.

It was no ordinary work of natural history that Darwin had undertaken. He had become convinced soon after the return of the *Beagle* that the standard account of species could not be sustained. It made no sense. There were too many species now, too many species that had flourished in the past and were now extinct, differences between adjacent species were minute; the original idea of "species," a crudely typological notion, was flawed. Nature, once something of its real extent was recognized, was a protean continuum whose shape and content had changed again and again over an unimaginably long history. This had happened on a planet whose rocky and watery faces too were forever changing. The only plausible explanation of diversity, past and present, was what Darwin and others referred to (guardedly!) as "transmutation" or "transformation" descent from predecessors and proliferation of new species. This implied a branching history, a tree of life. It implied that the species had not been made as such by God, but that they came into existence—and expired—by natural processes.

Was this a new idea? No. As is often noted, it was in the air. Darwin's grand-

1 The disease remains undiagnosed. Opinions vary about its identity. Chagas's disease, possibly contracted during one of his expeditions in the Brazilian jungle, has been proposed, as has a psychosomatic digestive syndrome.

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father Erasmus Darwin had written a long, lyrical exposition of it. The French comparative anatomist, Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck, was notorious for having proposed an inclusive theory of *transformisme*—of organic evolution. The idea was discussed, albeit reservedly, by others, including Darwin's teachers in Edinburgh, where the youth had tried to study medicine before moving to Cambridge to study theology. Darwin's own fear of announcing his ideas was augmented by the sneering scientific responses to a popular tract on evolution published (anonymously) by Robert Chambers. Evolution was an idea that sensible people, like Carlyle, thought best left unexamined. It was, as he said, "humiliating." Not only did it contradict Genesis, it was also a proposal for which there was then no plausible *mechanism*. And it was insulting to some great men of natural history.

Those eminences saw themselves as exploring the works of Deity, as opening to public view and to prayerful gratitude glimpses of the breadth of divine intelligence. This "natural theology," the disclosure and appreciation of the Designer's works, was understood as the overarching purpose of astronomy, geology, the life sciences. To prate of "transformation," to treat species as perishable, transient, or worse—as mere constructs of classification—was insulting. And Darwin was keenly aware of this, not least because he was at first a geologist, and knew what censure transformationist geology had suffered from orthodoxy. Later, he was painfully aware, and wept over the awareness, that denial of scripture must wound his beloved Emma. She had early made this clear to him. After the death of loved ones, especially of their adored child Anne, Emma's conviction that she would meet them again in Heaven helped to sustain her. If Genesis were wrong, then hopes of future reunion in eternity, too, might expire. So it seemed to her and to most everyone else. It was a denial not to be undertaken lightly. And there was still no plausible mechanism for the postulated transformations. Lamarck's notions were inadequate.

The solution grew slowly in Darwin's mind, but the search was catalyzed by his reading of Malthus. He was already convinced of descent with modification, i.e., that organic evolution was the cause of biological diversity. But Malthus showed that the potential ("geometrical") growth of human populations was constrained by the failure of resources—especially of food—to grow similarly. Hence there was *necessarily* an incessant struggle for resources and survival. Malthus's principle of population provided the motor for natural selection.

Darwin applied these insights to the whole of nature. Aware of the continuum of life forms, and of their profuse variation in time and space, he realized that the struggle to survive must mean a struggle to reproduce, and that the more successful variants would forever replace less successful reproducers. Given variation, and a changing environment, it must follow that old species would change and eventually be replaced by descendants differing significantly from them. This was an inevitable, natural process of selection. Evolution occurs, Darwin decided, via natural selection. The task before him was to test every observable consequence of the hypothesis; to examine and eliminate, if eliminable, its flaws; otherwise to abandon it; to establish that the essential variation does occur, and to explain *how* it occurs—in short, to understand the origin and evolution of species.

That is what he did between the time of the move to Downe and the time of his death at age seventy-three—the most reviled and most honored of all biologists. He was laid to rest in Westminster Abbey, near Isaac Newton. (An irony of greatness, that: Newton, deeply if idiosyncratically religious, and Darwin, an atheist who would have insisted on using Huxley's coinage to describe himself: agnostic.) The only clear failure of his program was the mechanism of heredity. He never got it right. Nor was he (or anyone else then) aware that the key had already been

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found by an obscure Austrian botanist, the monk Gregor Johann Mendel.

Janet Browne maps the course of Darwin's achievements and shows how his disparate investigations—on animal husbandry, pigeon fancying, the sexuality of orchids, the taxonomy, morphology, and sex of barnacles, the photo- and geotropisms of plant roots and shoots, the digestive capabilities and mental processes (including responses to piano music!) of earthworms—all fit the monumental workplan he had set for himself. She expands our understanding of the relationship between Darwin and Wallace, not only of their joint announcement of natural selection, but of their later disagreements about humanity (Wallace became a spiritualist), and of Darwin's continued respect and benefactions to Wallace, nevertheless. Copious citation of correspondence enlarges our understanding of the causes and consequences of Darwin's twenty-year delay in publication, and of the astonishing eventual reception, worldwide, of his *Origin of Species*.

"Darwinism" is today something of a misattribution. Calling modern evolutionary biology Darwinism is like calling physics "Newtonism." Nevertheless it is true that Darwin's main arguments (except those on heredity) lie at the heart of all the life sciences. To understand science in our culture and in the world we must understand Darwin's storm-tossed odyssey, the literal part in the *Beagle*, the metaphoric part at Downe. There is no better account of it than this dazzling new biography.

Beauty blasted

Dominic Hibberd Wilfred Owen: A New Biography. Ivan R. Dee, 424 pages, $30.

reviewed by Alexandra Mullen

When I was in high school in the late 1970s, my English class did a unit on war poetry. I remember reading Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead," Randall Jarrell's "Death of a Ball-Turret Gunner," and Richard Lovelace's "To Lucasta, on going to war": "I could not love thee, dear, so well lov'd I not honour more." (Who's Honor Moore?, was our juvenile joke.)

We also read a number of poems by Wilfred Owen (1893–1918). I now know this was partly because by the Sixties, when our teacher would have been training to teach us, Wilfred Owen had become *the* anti-war poet, the poet of pity enshrined in Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* (1962). Hatred of war was obviously an essential part of our education: to our teachers' horror, we knew nothing about Vietnam—my class was the first one they'd had who didn't recognize dog tags or a draft letter in a collage. But the larger, greater reason for reading Owen was the unmistakable power of his extraordinary poetry even (especially?) on callow students like us. His imagery carried us into comparing sonnets, had us listening for rhyme and pararhyme (e.g., silent/salient, wire/war), checking allusions and consulting maps, even voluntarily looking words up in the dictionary. My experience then was not a fluke. Whenever I have a bunch of college students dubious about poetry, Owen is guaranteed to galvanize them.

Owen has become the new Keats. Like Keats, the intensity of his love for poetry, his laboring in obscurity, above all the ironies and romance of his early death are powerful even despite their frequent telling: only five of Owen's poems were published during his lifetime; he suffered from shell-shock; back at the front, he died a week before the end of the war on an attempted canal crossing that he would have survived if it had been called off ten minutes earlier; on November 11, as the church bells were pealing out the news of the Armistice, his parents got the telegram reporting his death. For Owen and Keats, both dead in their mid-twenties, the life story can threaten to replace the work. Dominic Hibberd gracefully balances both in his new biography of Owen.

Hibberd, who has previously published two books on Owen, has an unsentimental

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sympathy for the verbal postures and absurdities of the young Owen. Nor does he let Owen's final poetic *annus mirabilis* predetermine the earlier parts of the story. Hibberd also judiciously leaves some gaps in Owen's life unfilled. Harold, Wilfred's long-lived younger brother, plays an important role in the footnotes. He took censorious scissors to Wilfred's letters and, not surprisingly, elicits some exasperation from the biographer: "Harold eventually reconciled himself to the idea of being Welsh, but he was never able to admit that one of his family's principal occupations had been shopkeeping." Harold once actually thanked Siegfried Sassoon for destroying letters that hinted at his brother's homosexuality. Hibberd treats the issue calmly—he concludes that Owen came to realize he was a homosexual but that "there is no evidence either way" to suggest he ever acted upon the discovery (except for a possible botched sexual relationship with Scott Moncrieff, the translator of Proust). Although Hibberd isn't writing a poet-and-his-age biography, the book richly details Owen's religious, educational, and class background.

Wilfred Owen came from the distinctly unromantic northern urban lower-middle-class. Owen's father was a railway clerk, his mother a serious Evangelical. Practical education, the earnest virtues of hard work, sobriety, and thrift, and genteel manners were their hopes for rising in society. This straining for status could be crippling to a poet—*stinking*, for example, "was a banned word in the Owen family"—and much of Owen's early poetry bears the marks of such anxious high-mindedness. Leaving school at fourteen, Owen worked hard to find a place for himself, but couldn't settle on the right niche: elementary-school teacher, parish assistant, Berlitz instructor, tutor . . . . Poetry had long been a constant, however. When he discovered a new poet—Keats, Wordsworth—he set himself to imitating him; he versified Hans Christian Andersen stories as an exercise; rail-passes from his father let him experience the frisson of literary places firsthand. And in a sense it was poetry that drew Owen into the war. Unlike his public-school contemporaries, he had been in no hurry to join up—Hibberd points out that Owen's first "artistic response to the war" was playing Chopin's *Marche Funèbre* on the piano. But when an older decadent poet who had befriended him, Laurent Tailhade, recruited soldiers with Anatole France, Owen thought it a "beautiful gesture." In 1916 he joined an officer's training corps, the Artists' Rifles.

At first Owen quite enjoyed the status of officer. He "amused himself by looking sternly at men his own age still in civilian dress, enjoying their embarrassed expressions." He proved to be a good officer, but by the very end of the war, in a late letter to Osbert Sitwell, he had come to a more ambiguous, even tormented, understanding of what that meant.

> For 14 hours yesterday I was at work—teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine he thirst till after the last halt; I attended his Supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet to see that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb and stands to attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha.

The War killed off most of his old abstract notions about "poetry": "I have no Fancies and no Feelings. . . . Positively they went numb with my feet." He'd landed in "seventh Hell," where the mud was "an octopus of sucking clay," the corpses in No Man's Land were frozen in their grotesque death throes, and men could drown in bomb craters. Owen was not yet the poet of pity—he collected battlefield souvenirs for himself and his youngest brother Colin—but the corpses in his poems are no longer decadent symbols, but the real decaying thing. During a nine-day bombardment in

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April 1917, Owen was blasted into a railway cutting where he spent days looking at his "brother officer [who] lay opposite in a similar hole. But he was covered with earth, and no relief will ever relieve him." A later shell disinterred the dead officer who lay "in various places round about."

As Hibberd notes, "Shell-shock gave [Owen] seventeen months of safety." The most important part of that time was spent at Craiglockhart War Hospital for Neurasthenic Officers. There Owen met the two people who most influenced his war poetry. First was Arthur Brock, "precisely the right doctor" for Owen. He was interested in treating not merely the illness, but the whole man in relationship with his environment (he had recently published a translation of Galen). He called his treatment "ergotherapy;" the work-cure he set for Owen included writing poetry to unleash "the phantoms of the mind."

Then appeared another soldier-poet. Siegfried Sassoon was already a published writer whose work Owen admired. Sassoon is often credited with discovering and revising Owen's poetry, but Hibberd's Sassoon is no Ezra Pound. Still, Sassoon, almost by his mere presence, encouraged Owen to work on his poems. He also introduced him to the aesthetic values of the proto-modernist Georgians and to rising poetic players such as Robert Graves and the Sitwells. Sassoon condescended to the hero-worshipping, provincially vowelled "little Owen" (again like Keats, Owen's shortness seemed to prevent taller upper-class contemporaries from appreciating his inner heroism). By this time Owen was mature enough to discount Sassoon's "blasting little smile" and could gratefully assess what he owed: "[Y]ou have *fixed* my Life—however short. You did not light me: I was always a mad comet; but you have fixed me."

Hibberd believes that, thanks to these new poetic possibilities, Owen was able to forge a "new mode for war poetry, neither Graves's cool stoicism nor Sassoon's tormented satire." Owen had always admired Keats' credo—"'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Beauty had been blasted out of the physical realm entirely, but Truth might still be possible. As he wrote in the Preface he drafted for the volume of poetry that didn't appear until after his death, "Above all I am not concerned with poetry./ My subject is War, and the pity of War./ The Poetry is in the pity."

Thrifty Owen loathed the waste of the wasteland. The fragments that he shores up against his ruins are made of more common stone than Eliot's—the Gospels and Tennyson—but they are more straightforwardly affecting, too. In such poems as "Dulce et Decorum Est," "Parable of the Old Man and the Young," "Exposure," "At a Calvary near Ancre," and the astonishing "Strange Meeting" in which he imagines a meeting between himself and a man he'd killed, Owen recreates the possibility of moral poetry. Sometimes the tone is one of moral excoriation: "Thinking of the eyes I have made sightless, and the bleeding lads' cheeks I have wiped, I say: Vengeance is mine, I, Owen will repay." But increasingly, he used what he had salvaged of his religious and pedagogic training for a nobler project. "Dulce et Decorum Est," the first poem of Owen's I ever read, begins by describing a mustard gas attack in which one soldier, too slow at getting his gas mask on, "drowns." The descriptions are harrowing, the final moral to all of us noncombatants pointed, but strangely generous.

> If in some smothering dreams, you too
> could pace
> Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
> And watch the white eyes writhing
> in his face,
> His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin,
> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted
> lungs
> Bitter as the cud
> Of vile, incurable sores on innocent
> tongues,—
> My friend, you would not tell with such high
> zest

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To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

The sensuous verbal luxury he learned from Keats has been transmuted into moral sympathy of strange power. And here's the final unintended irony: many readers first feel the power of Horace's words through Owen's. Among the dead, who gives whom the lie?

My Maso problem

Carole Maso Beauty Is Convulsive: The Passion of Frida Kahlo. Counterpoint, 170 pages, $24

reviewed by Ben Downing

I first came across the singular writings of Carole Maso about ten years ago, when she submitted to the journal I help edit a piece of what is known as poetic prose. Although we passed on the manuscript, it made such a strong impression on me that I decided to investigate Maso's extant *oeuvre*. Nor was I disappointed. For the rest of her work, consisting at that point of several "novels," turned out not only to equal but indeed to surpass the tantalizing sample I had seen. I began to follow her career with real interest, as she moved from Columbia to Brown (where until recently she directed the Creative Writing program), won a Lannan fellowship, and published yet more "novels," among other books. Not that I've actually bought any of these. But each time I spy a new Maso production, I eagerly open it and drink in, like a great gust of Giorgio perfume, the unmistakable aroma emanating from its pages, until finally I slip into a sort of algolagniac delirium. I have become, in short, a Masoist.

Thus far my Masoism has remained a private depravity, but now I have resolved to share it with the world, in the hope of infecting a few others. Let me expose you, then, to the Masoan manner in all its potency. Take *AVA,* described by its jacket copy as follows: "Ava Klein, thirty-nine, lover of life, world traveler, professor of comparative literature, is dying. From her hospital bed on this, her last day on earth, she makes one final ecstatic voyage. People, places, offhand memories, and imaginary things drift in and out of Ava's consciousness and weave their way through the narrative. The voices of her three former husbands emerge: Francesco, a filmmaker from Rome; Anatole, lost in the air over France; Carlos, a teenager from Granada. The ways people she loved expressed themselves in letters or at the beach or at the moment of desire return to her. There is Danilo, her current lover, a Czech novelist, and others, lovers of one night, as she sings the endless, joyous, erotic song cycles of her life." Here is a sample:

Under the pomegranate tree. Entwined in the grape arbor. Nothing and nowhere off-limits.

He calls me with clicks and hisses.

My throbbing neck, my throbbing hair, throbbing fingertips. I've heard this is what happens to a woman in her mid-thirties.

She finds herself on a foreign coast.

A throbbing. A certain pulsing. She seethes.

How to characterize such prose? Thankfully, we need not make the attempt, because Maso does so for us in "Precious, Disappearing Things: on *AVA*," included in *Break Every Rule: Essays on Language, Longing, & Moments of Desire*. It starts: "*AVA* is a living text. One that trembles and shudders. One that yearns." Maso also treats us to an appreciation of another of her "novels," *Aureole*. (This particular self-homage was written, she confides, in "Paris, city of light." City of light! A writer of Maso's originality can afford a few clichés.) "*Aureole* celebrates the resplendence of language and desire," she explains. "It is a work of reverie and ruin. Pleasure. Oblivion. Joy."

Yet *Break Every Rule* is not all sweetness and light; it also contains some withering denunciations. Mainstream fiction, in Maso's view, represents nothing less than "a

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kind of totalitarianism, with its tyrannical plot lines," and she is aghast at "the typical novelist's almost total disregard for language" (by "language" she presumably means the exquisite words that count, such as *desire*). But what upsets her most is the reception accorded our few genuine novelists: "The real contempt is reserved for the real writer, the real artist. She hears the scoffing of the bourgeoisie."

One might wonder how Maso came to triumph over such philistinism. In an astounding autobiographical essay called "The Shelter of the Alphabet," she delights to tell us. The short answer: *destiny*. Her mother having had two miscarriages, Maso's very conception was, she declares, "miraculous." Born in Paterson, New Jersey just as William Carlos Williams was completing Book Five of *Paterson*, she logically concludes that "I was born in a modernist masterpiece. . . . Mysteriously [Williams] is handing this to me as I now begin to breathe . . . it seems like destiny to me. . . . He has sent me on this charmed path." The first concrete sign of her preordination was an NEA that took her to France, where, naturally, she blossomed. Her unwilling return to "an America that loathes difference, otherness. . . . A country hostile to its art and artists" is heartbreaking to read of, as is the enforced nomadism of her teaching career. But weep not for Maso—as her title suggests, she has learned to take refuge in her ABCs: "I who live everywhere and nowhere have built a home of language. . . . A home of music and desire."

From Maso's home of music and desire there was, however, one thing missing: a child. As she recalls in *The Room Lit by Roses: A Journal of Pregnancy and Birth*, "I had become so entranced by the utterly hypnotic path I found myself on" that she had plumb forgotten to procreate. "From those weird, windy, solitary heights from [*sic*] which I worked now I watched the child wave, wave, and then finally vanish" (which calls irresistibly to mind that drifting fetus in *2001: A Space Odyssey*). But wait! Suddenly a "wave of clarity . . . passed through me, propelling me into an utterly charmed and charged night to retrieve that little waving figure who was mine." Hers, because the child *already existed in her writing!* "There she was at the periphery of every page . . . calling my name." Yet how to translate the wee bairn from page to pram? Not only was Maso's partner another woman, she herself was over forty. These obstacles notwithstanding, "the exact right moment with the exact right person came with strange speed—in an instant, in motion, and under a sky of enormous beauty and calm" (which must mean that the fateful copulation was an *al fresco* quickie). Even more incredibly, the lucky stud *also leapt straight from Maso's "novels"*! "Did this mysterious *l'étranger* [*sic*] from a far-off land, who uncannily had also existed in my pages for many years, somehow see in me a brilliance, illuminated as I must have been by my longing?" (More to the point, was the *étranger* ever informed of his paternity?) That Maso was so easily impregnated is less surprising when one considers that she authored both father and child, and whatever lingering incredulity one may feel vanishes when she explains, "To conception I brought the same things I bring to my writing: focus, faith, will, intuition, license, rigor, and recklessness."

Perhaps because I happened to stumble on *The Room Lit by Roses* when my wife was pregnant, I found it particularly strong stuff, and at the time I thought it represented the *ne plus ultra*. But I underestimated Maso. For in her new book, *Beauty Is Convulsive: The Passion of Frida Kahlo*, which is described as "a vibrant series of prose poems," she quite outstrips herself.

Could there be a more perfect pairing than Carole Maso and Frida Kahlo? Their very names chime. True, Maso is far from the first rapturously to identify with Kahlo. Nor can one overlook the coincidence of *Beauty* appearing almost simultaneously with Julie Taymor's biopic. But banish any suspicion that Maso has merely jumped on this commodious Mexican bandwagon. As she makes clear in her Author's Note, she

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enjoys a special affinity with Kahlo, such that *Beauty* is no mere book but a "communion." During the "miraculous months of writing"—Maso's proneness to miracle would seem to make her a shoo-in for canonization—"my own words and concerns intertwined with hers."

Indeed, the verbal sensibility manifested in Kahlo's diaries and letters, quotes from which Maso scatters through the book, is nearly indistinguishable from her own. Try to guess, for instance, who wrote the following: "He appreciates all that contains beauty, be it a woman or a mountain. . . . Like the cacti of his land, he grows strong and amazing either in sand or on rocks. . . . He lives with his strong sap in a ferocious environment." Well, the complete sentences give it away, as do the cacti; but you see what I mean.

What of *Beauty*'s self-advertised poeticism? Although Maso has long rubbed up against poetry, this is the first time she has actually assumed the bardic mantle. As one would expect, the shift in genre yields new wonders. For example, a number of pages remain all but blank. One such contains only these words: "martyrdom of glass. the great nonsense." I can't convey the effect of all that vasty white space surrounding the words—indicative, you know, of *silence*—but rest assured that it is memorable; and of course those decapitalizations add their own layer of profundity.

It is only in her concluding elegy, however, that Maso truly transcends herself. Behold:

> She nourishes the earth with her body, the woman with her body. She feeds the earth
>
> fecund one. darling earthling.
>
> soil, love.
>
> She holds herself above her—lowers herself feeding folds and folds of fertile, gorgeous earth.
>
> She smiles. *You are sweet. And Diego too would like you.* And she drags her down—rooted to the soil
>
> stone spine
>
> vagina fused to the throbbing earth
>
> sunken
>
> fucked.

The f-word! How pleasing it is, after all these years, to see Maso still elaborating her diction, still growing as a writer. A *Los Angeles Times* reviewer once gushed that Maso "epitomizes all that is great about American literature today." She epitomizes something all right.

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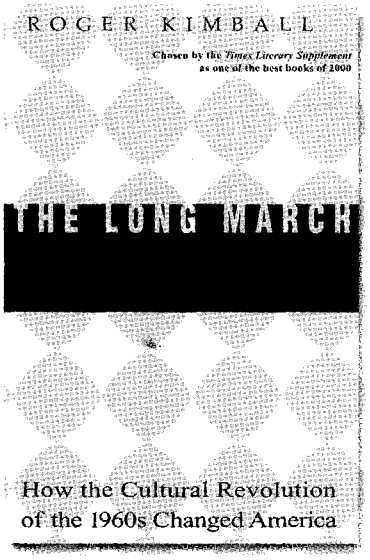
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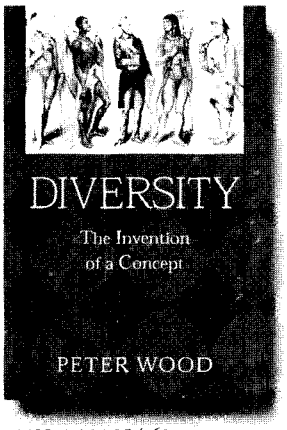

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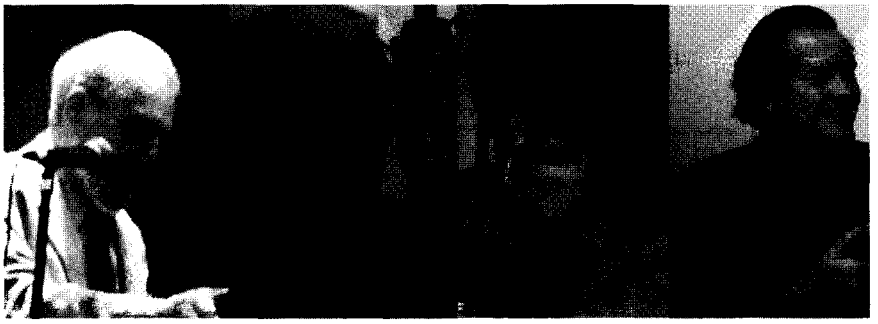

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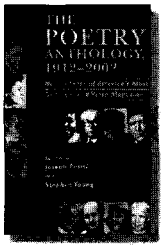

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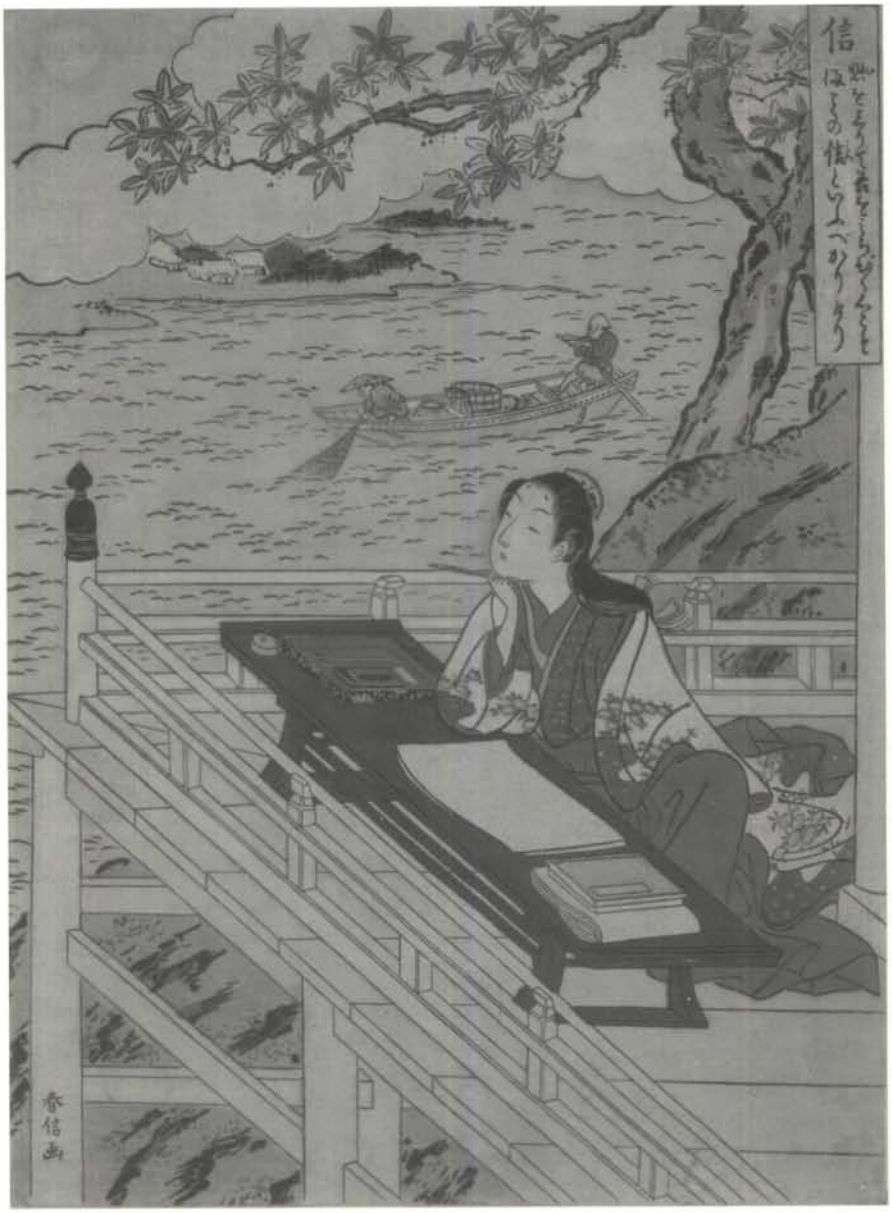

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